

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

MANUFACTURING “KOREA” IN CHINA:
THE COPRODUCTION OF COMMODITY VALUE AND NATIONALIST
IMAGINARIES IN THE CHINESE KIMCHI INDUSTRY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
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To Myungji Lee

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Notes on Names and Transliteration

In order to maintain the confidentiality of my interlocutors, I refer to my interlocutors and their company by pseudonyms. This dissertation uses the pinyin system for romanizing Mandarin and McCune-Reischauer system for Korean. However, I use the Revised Romanization (RR) system for some Korean interlocutors, even though their names in the dissertation are pseudonym, since most Koreans use the RR when romanizing their name for official uses. I use McCune-Reischauer system for romanizing Korean authors' names, unless I can identify their official names in English.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the material, semiotic, and logistical making of “Koreanness” in kimchi from the perspectives of kimchi manufacturers and distributors in China, who reflect on and respond to the changing economic and political conditions across China and South Korea. Kimchi is a fermented vegetable dish widely produced and consumed in Korean communities, which has been manufactured on a massive scale in China for export since the early 2000s. Korean-Chinese (*chosŏnjok*) Kimchi manufacturers in China, who started their manufacturing business targeting South Korean kimchi markets, gradually turn their attention to the Chinese markets where they see a rapidly increasing demand for exotic foreign food products such as “Korean” kimchi. Throughout the transition, they employ various business strategies to materialize, present, and promote the Koreanness of their kimchi, which can be translated into economic value in the Chinese markets. In their efforts, kimchi manufacturers and distributors in China are challenged to reflect on how their consumers in China imagine the differences and distance between “Korea” and China.

In this dissertation, I view the making of “Koreanness” as speculative efforts to produce *commodity value*, which conditions and is conditioned by the reconfiguration of *nationalist imaginaries* across South Korea and China. Nations function as foundational units in constructing imaginaries of the worlds, not only as communities with which people feel solidarity but also as the framework through which people make sense of their standing in the world through comparison. Consumers in China shape their imaginaries on economic and geopolitical orders of worlds as they navigate

their consumer choices, comparing and evaluating products from various parts of the world. Entrepreneurs in the Chinese kimchi industry mobilize product design, marketing, and logistical strategies to make “Korea” accessible to consumers while reminding them of the distance and difference between “Korea” and China. Admittedly, the businesses face various disruptions to the “ordinary” processes in which nationalist imaginaries facilitate commodity value formation, such as boycotts, miscommunication, and bad smells. This dissertation is attuned to the frictions in the supply chains through which people articulate their normative expectations and understandings of markets, examining the coproduction of value and imaginaries in terms of how it works, it should work, and it does not work.

Based on 13 months of fieldwork at a kimchi company in Qingdao, China, this dissertation engages with different scales in which the mobilities of commodities, people, and capital are coordinated for overcoming and performing the distance between “Korea” and China. The dissertation contributes to anthropological studies of market economies by analyzing the semiotic, material, and logistical formulation of commodity value. Methodologically, the dissertation explores the modes of imagination and mediation in which local(ized) encounters and practices are interconnected with macro-scale political economic dynamics. The dissertation also engages with current scholarship on Northeast Asia, contributing to understanding the economic, social, and political implications of “China’s rise” and the nature of nationalism in contemporary Northeast Asia.

Keyword: Commodity, Value, Imaginaries, Logistics, Mobility, Nationalism, Kimchi, Korean-Chinese (*chosŏnjok*), China, South Korea

Introduction

The Coproduction of Commodity Value and Nationalist Imaginaries

Manufacturing

Tiantian Food is a food manufacturing company that produces kimchi and other “Korean” food products. However, owners and employees often refer to their company as a “factory,” *kong-chang* in Korean, or *changzi* in Mandarin. Tiantian Food is not just a manufacturing factory for Korean food products. In addition to the roughly 100 production line workers who make kimchi and other food products over twelve-hour daily shifts, approximately 20 employees work in an office annexed to the production line floor. They supervise the production process, manage payments and revenues, coordinate supply and shipping schedules, and communicate with suppliers, sales representatives, and government officials. They also manage Tiantian Food’s online sales—a recent addition to their work when I started my fieldwork in 2017. Some of them create and test new products, design new packages, take product photos and greet potential partners and clients. So, Tiantian Food is a company that handles the design, distribution, and marketing of its products. Still, people at Tiantian Food are used to

identifying and thinking of their company as simply a factory where products are manufactured.

Admittedly, when you work at Tiantian Food, it is difficult to dismiss the importance of manufacturing. About a third of the company's land is occupied by the bulky building where kimchi and other food products are made, packed, and stored. The office takes up only a small room at a corner of the production line building. The spacious grounds in front of the factory building, where large trucks and trailers come in and out busily, are paved with cement. There are two other buildings, a dormitory building where most production line workers eat and sleep and a small building in which the owners' family lived until they purchased an apartment. But these two buildings are much smaller than and peripheral to the main factory building.

These spaces were designed when manufacturing was the only role that Tiantian Food was intended to accomplish. Tiantian Food was established in 2006, when its owners Song and Choi, Korean-Chinese (*chosŏnjok*) from Northeastern China, came to Chengyang, Qingdao to join the kimchi business boom. In the mid-2000s, many kimchi factories emerged in Qingdao to profit from rapidly increasing demand for kimchi from South Korea. At the time, South Korean traders ordered a few 40-foot containers every week, each filled with about 50 tons of spicy napa cabbage kimchi packed in 10kg paper boxes. South Korean traders provided Chinese manufacturers with recipes, product labels, and box designs featuring their brand logos. Chinese manufacturers needed to materialize all the immaterial information provided by their South Korean clients—making kimchi with the recipes, printing and attaching the labels, and packing kimchi in boxes made by local box companies. In other words, Chinese kimchi companies could—and were expected to—focus solely on manufacturing, the process South Koreans wanted to outsource to Chinese partners.

Like other kimchi companies established in the 2000s, Tiantian Food mainly focused on producing kimchi for export to South Korea, an endeavor in which it achieved great success. In an anecdote proudly recollected by Song, the port officials in Busan could recognize Tiantian Food's kimchi by its smell, showing how much kimchi they exported to South Korea. Over time, as orders from South Korean clients surpassed the factory's manufacturing capacity, Choi rented a few nearby kimchi factories to meet demand. Kimchi companies like Tiantian Food did not need to care about sales, marketing, or the development of new products. Those were their South Korean clients' jobs. They did not need a big office, either. Choi's sister supervised the production line, and her husband took care of machinery, electricity, and sewage maintenance. Choi took care of the finances with her accountants, and Song handled the relationship with South Korean clients. Both the owners' family and workers from rural areas slept on the company grounds most days, maximizing the amount of time for making kimchi. At that time, Tiantian Food had a strong identity as a *factory*, manufacturing kimchi for South Korean *companies*.

The kimchi that Tiantian Food made, however well-known it was by some port officials in Busan, was eventually distributed and sold under the name of South Korean companies. These companies were not necessarily large or well known, nor did they develop brands for South Korean consumer markets. Their brands, which evoked images of nature and family (*Blue Sky Kimchi, Mom's Kimchi, Pure Garden Kimchi*), were only sold to wholesalers who supplied kimchi to cafeterias and restaurants. In these settings, small portions of kimchi are served, free of charge, alongside main dishes. Most South Korean consumers thus did not recognize the names of either Tiantian Food or the South Korean distributors. Not being well known by end consumers was not a problem. Instead, South Korean importers counted on the anonymity of their products.

Given the negative perception of Made-in-China kimchi in South Korea (See Chapter 1), it was better for business if South Korean consumers did not know or care about who made the kimchi or where it came from. Thus, in its early years, Tiantian Food enjoyed success because it was good at performing the role of the *anonymous* Chinese manufacturer, making cheap “Korean” kimchi whose “Chinese” origin was not readily apparent to its consumers in South Korea.

As Tiantian Food achieved success in the export business, a few China-based clients approached them. Like South Korean importers, they wanted Tiantian Food to make kimchi for their companies. The difference was that they wanted to distribute kimchi in Chinese markets. The new clients saw a demand for kimchi in ethnic Korean communities in major Chinese cities, where many South Koreans and Korean-Chinese created ethnic enclaves filled with “Korean” restaurants, supermarkets, and shops (See Chapter 1). They also speculated that kimchi and other “Korean” food would become popular among young, urban, middle-class Chinese consumers, who aspired to exotic and cosmopolitan lifestyles through everyday consumption (See Chapter 2 and 3). Unlike Tiantian’s South Korean importers, these domestic clients wanted kimchi to be packed in smaller, consumer-sized packages, which promoted their brands and company names to Chinese consumers. Still, whether their clients sold kimchi in South Korea or China, Tiantian Food largely remained a manufacturer for client companies, only appearing on their labels as a *designated manufacturing party (shouweituofang)*.

Song and Choi enjoyed partnering with new clients expanding in domestic Chinese markets. Unlike South Korean importers, the domestic clients did not conceal Tiantian Food’s location in China or identity as a Chinese manufacturer. They proudly introduced Tiantian Food as a trustworthy manufacturer, which had exported “authentic” Korean kimchi to South Korea for years. The new clients put more

emphasis on quality than did the South Korean importers, who vigorously pushed for lower costs and occasionally switched to rival manufacturers offering lower prices. More importantly, Song and Choi could monitor the rapid growth of the domestic kimchi distributors, carefully observing how much profit distributors made with the kimchi they manufactured. They realized that their kimchi could be sold at a higher price in China than in South Korea, and potentially in greater quantities given the scale of rapidly growing retail markets in China.

Thus, after careful consideration, contentious debate, and meticulous planning, Tiantian Food launched kimchi products under its own brand for the Chinese markets. It established a partnership with Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs who had an expansive sales network in the ethnic Korean enclaves of their cities. These sales representatives, *taeri* in Korean or *daili* in Mandarin, regularly ordered kimchi from Tiantian Food, stored the shipments in their own refrigerated warehouses, and distributed the products in their designated regions. By contracting with local Korean-Chinese sales representatives, Tiantian Food rapidly expanded its domestic sales network, first in Shandong and Northeastern China, soon in metropolises like Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shanghai.

As it expanded domestic sales, Tiantian Food offered its kimchi products in more size options and developed various new types of kimchi and other “Korean” food products. The production line floor, which was designed to efficiently produce a single type of kimchi, was radically reorganized to manufacture a dozen different types of kimchi in many different package sizes. The office hired more employees to communicate with sales representatives and designers to create product images and package designs for new products. When I started my fieldwork in Tiantian Food in 2017, it launched its online shopping website and hired a few more employees to

manage online sales and customer relations. More recently, it commissioned other factories in China and South Korea to manufacture food products in order to increase the variety of the Korean foods it distributes through sales representatives and online websites.

Nevertheless, Tiantian Food did not simply switch from exports to domestic sales or transition from being a factory to a company. Such transitions are always gradual, which means that Tiantian Food performs multiple roles simultaneously. Tiantian Food did not abandon the export business after its domestic sales expanded, although the scale and modes of its exports have changed over time. While it no longer counts on or actively seeks export opportunities, it occasionally partners with clients in South Korea, Japan, Australia, Vietnam, and Canada to export kimchi under the clients' brands. In South Korea and Japan, it contracts with local Korean-Chinese sales representatives and regularly export Tiantian Food-branded kimchi products, which now have a good reputation among Korean-Chinese communities in South Korea and Japan.

Tiantian Food still makes kimchi for other companies in the domestic market, but not the same companies it did initially. Jang, the owner of a small kimchi company in Xi'an at that time, was one of the first clients who approached Tiantian Food to buy kimchi for domestic distribution. Distributing various Korean food products in Xi'an region, she still works with Tiantian Food, but as one of Tiantian Food's sales representatives. Kim's Kimchi, the South Korean-owned company, which had partnered with Tiantian Food for domestic kimchi sales, changed its manufacturer in the early 2010s and now competes with Tiantian Food in major Chinese cities. In place of this relationship, Tiantian Food established a partnership with K Food, a well-known South Korean food company expanding its sales in China. K Food distributes its products, including kimchi, through nationwide franchise supermarkets to which

Tiantian Food (and most of its sales representatives) do not otherwise have access. S Food, one of the biggest instant noodle companies in South Korea, commissions Tiantian Food to manufacture kimchi packets for their cup noodle products. S Food's cup noodles are distributed in South Korea and China, which exemplifies how the modes of export have changed over the years.

Many things have changed for Tiantian Food since its beginning. However, Tiantian Food has never stopped manufacturing kimchi. Every day a few trucks full of napa cabbage arrive at the factory. Over a hundred production line workers go to work at 7:30 in the morning. Over twelve hours a day on average, they wash and cut vegetables, mix seasonings, package kimchi, and store and move kimchi boxes. What have changed over time are the social relations in which manufacturing is coordinated: *for whom* Tiantian Food manufactures kimchi. These changes in social relations affect how Tiantian Food makes, packages, and stores kimchi products, and how these products are moved, evaluated, and promoted by those who order and distribute Tiantian Food's kimchi. And as I explained in detail, the changes are always gradual and thus partial. They are limited by the material foundations of the business, which cannot be easily modified without disruption or huge investment, as well as by the complicated calculations involved in exploring uncharted territories while preserving current modes of profit-making. Tiantian Food engages in export, outsourced manufacturing, and domestic sales simultaneously, in each case based on distinct evaluations and speculations regarding the value of its products and the potential of prospective markets. Thus, *manufacturing* in Tiantian Food is complicatedly situated within a speculative assessment of the past, present, and future of "China," where Tiantian Food manufactures and now sells kimchi.

China

The changes that Tiantian Food has undergone are not unique to them or to kimchi manufacturers in China. Since China reentered the global capitalist economy in the 1980s by gradually implementing economic reforms (*Reform and Open Policy*), it has rapidly assumed the role of “the world’s factory,” manufacturing cheap products at a massive scale using their vast raw materials and undervalued labor power (Harvey 2007; Ngai 2005). Many manufacturing industries, which had previously settled in developing countries featuring low wages and corporate taxes and lax environmental regulations, relocated to coastal Chinese cities not just to save production costs but also to expand manufacturing capacity. As Chinese factories supplied enormous quantities of manufactured goods to the world, China’s national economy grew at an unprecedented pace and scale. Chinese manufacturers employed large numbers of workers who were laid off from state-owned companies or who migrated from rural villages (M. Cho 2013; H. Yan 2008; 2003). Thanks to logistical innovations, economies of scale, and trade-friendly policies, Chinese industries manufactured various products at prices and in quantities unmatched by other countries (Levinson 2010).

The rapid development of China’s national economy is not historically unique. Although distinguished by the scale and trajectory of its growth, China has done what other countries like the United States, Japan, and South Korea once did to kickstart their own economic development: manufacture basic products like toys and umbrellas. Through engaging in labor-intensive, low-margin, and low-technology manufacturing businesses, these countries established the economic and industrial precedent for “climbing up the manufacturing ladder,” i.e., for moving on to manufacturing high-technology, high-value commodities like cars, computers, and cellular phones. Since the

economic reforms of the 1980s, Chinese companies have achieved impressive success in manufacturing basic products. Cheap, Chinese-made goods are so pervasive that “Made in China” has become a synonym for cheap (and often inferior) products in many parts of the world. At the same time, as Chinese companies, supported by the government, expand their market share in high-technology, high-value industries, China’s economy follows the path of previous successful examples (Bui and Wee 2018).

The industrial transition in China's national economy, like the changes at Tiantian Food, is gradual and partial. While China is obviously “climbing up the manufacturing ladder” as it makes more expensive goods, China has not released its hold on the manufacture of cheap products. Chinese companies today make more cheap goods than they did in 2000, even though many labor-intensive manufacturing industries have moved to other developing countries with lower wages and laxer environmental regulations. Like kimchi products from Tiantian Food, the social relations in which cheap, Made-in-China products are made, moved, and consumed, have changed. Rather than merely supplying products to foreign distributors, more Chinese manufacturers have better control over their sales in foreign countries. For example, Chinese manufacturers now post their products on Amazon to adjust the prices, respond to consumer feedback, and sell the products under their brands registered at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (Hessler 2021).

Another significant change in China’s economy is the rapid development of its domestic consumer markets. The practice of manufacturing and exporting goods to foreign markets was based on the assessment that Chinese consumers did not have the purchasing power to buy commodities at the prices that American or European consumers would pay (nor the quantities they would consume). The comparatively high purchasing power exercised by developed nations justified higher prices on the

tags of Chinese-made dolls. The underdevelopment of consumer markets in China—or the imperfect commodification of everyday lives in postsocialist China—made it possible to keep the wages of Chinese manufacturing workers low. Thus, labor-intensive manufacturing industries in China profited from the gap in purchasing power between developed countries and China, leading to their capitalist accumulation and expansion.

Nevertheless, with the rapid development of the national economy, Chinese people accumulate wealth to purchase houses, automobiles, cellular phones, and appliances—in other words, they become consumers. As Hyun Ok Park argues, the desire to consume in China is a continuation of the pursuit of socialist utopian dreams, which now can only be achieved by participating in privatized market economies (H. Park 2015). The desire for consumption facilitates the constant inflow of rural, young, and unskilled laborers into labor-intensive manufacturing industries. Young people from rural villages join factories not only to make money but also to embody the commodified urban lifestyles that are not available in their homes (H. Yan 2003; Ngai 2003). Consumption is also encouraged as a part of national economic planning. Once deemed anti-revolutionary and unpatriotic, consumption is now celebrated as a contribution to the further growth of the national economy and to the nation's incorporation into the global economy (Ngai 2003; Gerth 2010; Rofel 2007).

Corporations both in and beyond China have always paid attention to the potentialities of Chinese consumer markets. For example, as diplomatic relations between China and the United States recovered in the late 1980s, KFC and McDonalds quickly established Chinese subsidiaries and opened shops in major Chinese cities. Chinese consumers and their children formed long lines in front of these stores to taste authentic American food and embrace a new “western” lifestyle (Jing 2000; Y. Yan

2000). It did not take long for them to flourish all over the country, both in big and small cities. Taiwanese businesspeople also made considerable investments in mainland China, not only to relocate their manufacturing plants but also to sell Taiwanese books, TV dramas, and albums, which Chinese consumers found exotic and familiar at the same time (Gerth 2010). Consumerism in postsocialist China—the proliferation of mass-produced consumer goods and their importance in media discourses and identity formation (Gerth 2020)—has radically reconfigured the material lives of Chinese people, their social and cultural interactions, and the economic and industrial structures of Chinese society (Davis 2000). As of 2020, China is now the second-largest retail market in the world, second only to the United States, and many experts forecast the gap will soon be reduced or reversed (Wang and Zhang 2020).

In sum, the transition that Tiantian Food has undergone is a series of speculative and reflexive responses to larger economic, industrial, and social changes in China involving rapid growth in consumer markets even as export-oriented manufacturing industries remain robust. Its responses as a company—or the “becoming” of a company—are conditioned by “past” experience manufacturing cheap kimchi for export, material foundations oriented to the mass production of a single type of kimchi, the speed and scale of capital being circulated for international trade, and by the social relations it has established with clients, suppliers, and government officials. At the same time, Tiantian Food’s owners feel compelled to prepare for changes in the “future,” when Chinese markets grow so much that selling kimchi to domestic consumers becomes more profitable than exporting to South Korea.

Time does not pass at the same pace for everyone; at least, it is not perceived to do so. For some, such as kimchi manufacturers who still rely on exports to South Korea, the present is a continuation of the “past”: the time when Chinese companies profit from

the gap in purchasing power between developed countries and China. For others, like those who have made the transition to domestic sales—*zhuan neixiao*, the “future” is already happening. For many individual Chinese, the “past” and the “future” are entangled in their everyday lives in complicated ways, which they cannot always understand or act upon. Many blue-collar workers, such as production line workers at Tiantian Food, perceive the increased availability of consumer goods through various channels. Still, they barely embrace the presentness of a “future” as their working conditions and wages have not changed much from the “past.”

“Korea”

For Tiantian Food, the temporal conundrum—how to prepare for the “future” while not losing hold of revenues from the “past”—overlaps with another challenge: (re)defining its relationship with “Korea.” When it focused on exporting kimchi to South Korea, its mission was straightforward: manufacturing “Korean” kimchi that South Korean consumers would like. The owners’ background as Korean-Chinese was helpful for their export business. They were trusted to know what “Korean” kimchi is, how to make it, and what “Koreans” find appealing or unappealing in their kimchi. Admittedly, some South Korean clients were concerned with slight differences in gastronomic sensitivity and quality standards as between South Koreans and Korean-Chinese. They worried that South Korean consumers might not accept the Korean-Chinese vision of “Korean” kimchi, finding it inauthentic or inappropriate. Still, compared to other Han-Chinese kimchi manufacturers, Song and Choi were entrusted by South Korean clients with the minor recipe modifications and other judgments they felt necessary to manufacture “(South) Koreanness” in their kimchi.

However, as it gradually (and partially) transitions to domestic sales, Tiantian Food has been challenged to reconsider the identity of its kimchi products. Tiantian Food still works hard to make authentic “Korean” kimchi and to promote the “Koreanness” of its kimchi products to consumers. But it no longer approaches the “Koreanness” of kimchi from the perspectives of South Koreans. Tiantian Food’s Korean kimchi circulates among South Koreans, Korean-Chinese, and non-Korean ethnic Chinese (conventionally categorized as Han Chinese) in various regions of China. All of them have their own expectations of “Korean” kimchi. Both South Koreans and Korean-Chinese have ideals of Korean kimchi, which are usually informed by kimchi their families made and ate at home.¹ While they are aware of the variety of kimchi, their expectations regarding Korean kimchi are likely to be tied to the types, styles, and taste of kimchi they ate at home, often rejecting different ones for being “not Korean enough” or even “inauthentic.” South Koreans in China, for example, often express dissatisfaction with kimchi made by Korean-Chinese restaurants or companies, frowning upon its “Chinese” taste. Many Korean-Chinese enjoy kimchi made of ingredients like *yŏngch’ae* (garden cress) and cilantro seeds, which are unfamiliar to and unwelcome by South Koreans. Meanwhile, they do not like kimchi with large amounts of *chŏtkal* (salted seafood), an ingredient commonly used in South Korean kimchi but rarely used in North Korean and Korean-Chinese kimchi.

The differences in taste and expectation between Korean-Chinese and South Koreans posed some challenges for selling kimchi in domestic Chinese markets. Still, Tiantian Food at least had some experience and knowledge in the matter. As Korean-Chinese

¹ For example, my ideal Korean kimchi is my grandmother’s kimchi, which has small croakers fermented between the layers of napa cabbage. Her kimchi has a pungent smell I would describe as refreshing, and the flesh of fish melts like butter in my mouth.

from Northeastern China, Tiantian Food's founders are familiar with the palate and expectations of Korean-Chinese consumers—or at least they think they are. Years of experience in the export business have taught them about the taste and expectations of South Korean kimchi consumers, as its South Korean clients delivered feedback or lodged complaints when its kimchi did not meet their expectations.

However, it is challenging to figure out how to sell kimchi to domestic Han Chinese consumers, who have little or no previous experience eating kimchi. How should it introduce kimchi? As Korean food or as a version of Chinese dishes with which Chinese consumers are more familiar? Should it stick to the recipes and styles of authentic Korean kimchi it sells to South Koreans and Korean-Chinese, or should it change to accommodate the palate and expectation of Chinese consumers? In sum, how do kimchi manufacturers in China manipulate and communicate the “Koreanness” of kimchi, thus adding value to their kimchi products?

Like other kimchi companies in China, which have sold kimchi in domestic markets, Tiantian Food has dealt with the conundrum of redefining and reconfiguring “Korean” qualities in its kimchi products for “Chinese” consumers. The taste, color, and texture of kimchi are carefully adjusted to bring forth the Korean qualities of kimchi in a way that Chinese consumers can appreciate. Added words on packages, slogans in online webpages and magazine advertisements, and verbal communication with clients and consumers are all mobilized to promote kimchi's “Korean” identity and character. Presenting the “Korean” characteristics of its kimchi, which requires various levels of communication and collaboration among people and places, is justified not only because kimchi is commonly known as “Korean” food among Chinese, but also because being recognized as “Korean” is expected to help sales or add to a product's value.

In sum, as Tiantian Food makes a transition to domestic sales, it has diversified its product lines and expanded sales to South Koreans in China, Chinese Korean, and Han Chinese consumers. Throughout these developments, Tiantian Food has been challenged to reflect on how the Koreanness of its kimchi is materially, semiotically, and logistically configured and eventually translated into economic value. Its business decisions and strategies reveal how Tiantian Food expects (and aspires) to make a profit from manufacturing “Korean” qualities, communicating “Korean” value, and engaging with consumers’ imaginaries of “Korea.”

This dissertation will examine the material, semiotic, and logistical making of “Koreanness”² in kimchi from the perspectives of kimchi manufacturers and distributors in China, who reflect on and respond to the changing economic and political conditions across China and South Korea. I propose to view the making of “Koreanness” as a speculative effort to produce commodity *value*, which conditions and is conditioned by the reconfiguration of *distance* and *imaginaries* in globalizing market economies. In this introduction, I will map out the conceptual and methodological frameworks through which I situate the formulation of commodity value within larger-scale political economic dynamics and explain how the relationship between micro-scale value formation and macro-scale socioeconomic changes can be ethnographically studied.

² I scare-quote “Korea,” “Korean,” and “Koreanness” to emphasize its nature as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989). As I explain further in Chapter 1, “Korea” can refer to a national, ethnic, or cultural entity of its territorial and temporal boundary is defined in different manners, although the differences in its implication do not hinder the communication among people who use the term. For the sake of readability, I will scare-quote “Korea” only at the beginning of sections or chapters. Still, by Korea/Korean/Koreanness, I always mean “Korea” of which implications compete with one another in various contexts and situations.

The Formulation of “Koreanness” as Commodity Value

So, in what ways can kimchi be “Korean”? While there are legal frameworks through which the origins of products can be determined (Bourgeois 1994; Das and Ratna 2011), the Koreanness of Tiantian Food’s kimchi is not claimed based on a legal definition. Under any standard for determining the origins of a product, kimchi produced in China with Chinese ingredients would not be labeled as “Made in Korea.” Thus, “Koreanness” is not a claim on territorial belonging or origin, but rather a claim on cultural, ethnic, or national identity, oriented towards adding value to commodities.

Asif Agha (2011), in his discussion of how commodities mediate social interactions, provides critical insights into how commodities embody cultural, ethnic, or national identities. First, the images or identities of commodities are *formulated* by manufacturers and related agencies to promote their sale or produce added value. Semiotic practices designed to imbue objects with signs are projects that may or may not be effective (27). Thus, the values added are not intrinsic to a commodity but contingent upon whether the signs are taken up as intended (28). Kimchi manufacturers put a lot of effort into presenting kimchi products as Korean, which they expect will add value to their commodities. Their efforts are always defeasible (26), not only because potential consumers may not read the manufacturers’ messages—both textual and nontextual—as intended (Chapter 3), but also because it is not guaranteed that being perceived as Korean will actually help sales or add to product value (Chapter 2).

Second, various semiotic formulations are mobilized to *personify* objects, linking them to aspects of persons and their activities (29). Personal qualities such as psychological propensities and group membership are appropriated to characterize the objects, differentiating them from others as personal attributes do among people. By

ambiguously and simultaneously applying personal attributes to both things and people, advertisements persuade readers—potential consumers—to relate either the qualities of products to their users or the qualities of users to the products they use (29-37). In the advertisements, packages, and pamphlets of Tiantian Food, Koreanness is simultaneously (and often ambiguously) applied to the company owners, the company, and its products. And it is applied without specifying whether Koreanness refers to a cultural, ethnic, or national identity. This ambiguity and versatility allow potential buyers to project their expectations and imagination of Korea—the textual, aesthetic, and gastronomic dimensions of Koreanness—when they interpret the messages intended by manufacturers. Thus, consumers may not always interpret the presentation of Korea as manufacturers or other related agencies intended. Still, such uncertainty is tolerated or even proactively utilized as long as it contributes to producing added value.

Third, signs formulated and attached to commodities *differentiate* them from other objects and their users from other people (26). Object-signs are situated within the semiotic field of diacritics, registers that typify persons and things with specific attributes while contrasting them with those of other social categories and characters. Semiotic formulations are mobilized to imbue objects with signs that contrast with the signs attached to other objects. When perceived by potential consumers following the producers' intention, the diacritics are translated into the economic value of commodities. Tiantian Food put a lot of effort into articulating and emphasizing the Koreanness of kimchi in its product photos, package designs, and advertisements to align the products with other "Korean" commodities and differentiate them from other non-Korean or Chinese products. When potential consumers find the differences between "Korean" kimchi and other "Chinese" products to be meaningful, the

Koreanness of kimchi adds value to the products. In other words, the Koreanness of kimchi as a meaningful difference persuades consumers to choose Korean kimchi over comparable Chinese or non-Korean food items or to accept higher prices compared to other food products made with similar ingredients.

Lastly, commodity formulations—semiotic projects to create differences that are translatable into the economic value of commodities—are conditioned by the *gap* between promises and realities. Agha begins his discussion with the case of Josiah Wedgwood, who made dinnerware for the court and aristocracy and later marketed them to commoners as emblems of higher status (22). The dinnerware recalled the ease, luxury, and elegance of aristocratic life, which was beyond reach for most commoners in 18th century England. Thus, the gap between depicted personae (aristocracy) and target markets (commoners) conditioned the “performative efficacy” of semiotic formulations, which registered Wedgwood dinnerware as emblems of high-status and boosted their sales among the rising European bourgeois (23-4). The Koreanness of kimchi is constituted as a potentially valuable sign attached to kimchi products because of the distance between “Korea” as a source of cultural influences and commodities and “China” as a place for everyday material lives. In other words, the semiotic formulation of Koreanness is conditioned by the distance that restricts or limits the ways Korean characters can be claimed and articulated, thus rendering Korean commodities rarer and more valuable.

Distance, Mobility, and Logistics

Distance is a capitalist problem and opportunity. Things cannot be commodities unless they leave their sites of manufacture and are handed to consumers. Exchange—

the quintessential condition of capitalist production—does not happen without overcoming distance, even when commodities are immaterial. People, things, information, and money move across borders to make exchanges happen, and they do so with the help of technological and infrastructural innovations designed to expedite and expand the circulation of capital at a global scale (Levinson 2010; Cowen 2014). Distance poses challenges to capitalist accumulation as it not only slows down the conversion of surplus value into profit (Marx 1992), but also requires complicated forms of calculation and coordination to move things to various places at the right time (Cowen 2014).

Logistics, the management of moving people, things, money, and information, is not simply mobilized to reduce the cost of capitalist production. By redistributing production processes and calibrating the speed and rhythm of material circulation, logistics reformulate the spatial and temporal organization of economic spheres for maximizing profit (Cowen 2014). In other words, distance is not simply shortened or overcome with faster trucks or alternative routes. Distance is remade by assembling and marketing goods across various locations, blurring the distinction between production, distribution, and consumption (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 149). Time is not saved nor wasted but restructured by obscuring the distinctions between production and transportation (Cowen 2014) and between work and lives (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; S. Park 2012). Logistical calculations, analyses, strategies, and solutions are all mobilized to recreate the spatiotemporal configuration of global societies in which commodities, people, and information circulate, expediting and expanding capitalist accumulation and exploitation.

The logistical remaking of distance is complicatedly entangled with its obliteration and conjuration. Distance needs to be overcome to bring commodities (from afar) to

consumers and profits for manufacturers and distributors while being reminded to justify their (added) value. Without the recognition of distance, logistical coordination and innovation cannot be translated into the value of commodities. By reminding or recognizing distance, I do not narrowly mean the symbolic or semiotic communication of its meanings. Distance can be reminded and recognized not only through explanations added to packaging, advertising slogans, or verbal communication with consumers, but also through material qualities that can be perceived, interpreted, and promoted as those from far away. The speed, trajectories, conditions, and social relations of the movement of commodities are carefully planned, monitored, and readjusted to preserve and enhance the material qualities of distance and effectively promoted and emphasized through various channels of communication.

In other words, distance is a qualisign, the semiotic meanings of which are conditioned by and embodied through their material qualities (Chu 2010; Munn 1986; Peirce 1955). Distance is overcome through logistical coordination, embodied in the material qualities of products, and semiotically registered in verbal and nonverbal communication. Distance is scaled and registered in the material composition of commodities, the social relations of commodity supply chains, and the imaginaries of broader worlds in which commodities are circulated.

Thus, this dissertation will examine the logistical, material, and semiotic making of *distance* in the Chinese kimchi industry, which conditions the formulation of commodity value and of nationalist imaginaries. By overcoming and performing the distance between China and “Korea,” “Korean” kimchi is registered, perceived, and promoted as a commodity with a distinctive value in Chinese markets. People imagine the geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural orders of nations by reflecting on, participating in, and sometimes disrupting the configuration of distance as they make,

move, and consume (or decline to consume) Korean kimchi. The logistical, material, and semiotic making of distance, as I will further explain using the idiom of coproduction, is a messy, unstable, and uncertain process, which reflects the tensions, inequalities, and misunderstanding in larger Chinese and Korean societies.

“Koreanness” as Nationalist Imaginaries

This dissertation examines how the production and circulation of commodities are embedded in the collective imagination of larger worlds, especially of nations. Benedict Anderson calls for attention to nationality and nationalism as *imagined* artifacts, emerging in particular historical conditions, yet applicable to various social contexts as a module for political collectivity (Anderson 2006, 4). By imagination, Anderson refers to the epistemological, normative, and affective constructions of social relations beyond face-to-face interactions (6), conditioned by the development of print-capitalism and historical forces at the end of the 18th century. People who do not meet or know each other may still share an identity or sense of belonging to a territory that they imagine together with the help of nationally-circulated newspapers (and museums, maps, and census). Therefore, in Anderson’s analysis of nationality and nationalism, imagination is not a fabrication or false consciousness but another mode of sociality that has epistemological, moral, and affective efficacies.

Charles Taylor defines social imaginaries as an implicit and normative understanding of social orders, which reproduce social practices (Taylor 2004). Imaginaries of people’s social existence, when shared and held collectively, “script” people’s social interactions and practices according to particular patterns and orders. Taylor emphasizes that imaginaries are not “necessarily tilted toward the status quo”

(28). Imaginaries change either through theories—abstractions or idealizations of alternative moral orders—that penetrate them, or through new practices that mandate their reconfiguration. Taking demonstrations in Manila and Tiananmen as examples, Taylor shows that social imaginaries' spatial and temporal boundaries are potentially limitless (27). Although not always, people make sense of their existence, practices, and becoming in relation to other people and nations, contemplating where they stand in their history. In other words, people do not just imagine nations—nor is their imagination necessarily limited by territorial borders. They imagine *the world* to comprehend where they and their nations stand and what differences they can make.

Of course, the world being imagined does not include everything in the world (28). Our imagination of the world is by nature selective, partial, and often flawed. Anna Tsing uses the term *worlding*, which she inherits from Spivak's application of Heidegger to her postcolonial literature critique, to interrogate the imagination of worlds (or the whole) that is entangled with gaps, misunderstandings, and omissions (Tsing 2010). According to Tsing, worldings are attempts to grasp the relationality of worlds (50), situating knowledge within the broader contexts of knowledge production and practices. Worldings enable us to "know" particular objects in the world, without which we cannot make sense of our observations nor understand why and how they matter. At the same time, worldings limit the scope of research collaboration and orient research focuses to particular matters based on specific presumptions regarding nature and history. Like Anderson and Taylor, Tsing does not claim that worldings are fake or false but emphasizes how our knowledge and actions are conditioned by particular ways of imagining larger worlds that are unstable, incomplete, and misleading (63).

Drawing upon political theories of collective imagination, such as those of Anderson and Taylor, Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim focus on the collective visions of

desirable futures that can be achieved through advances in science and technology, which she calls sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 5). Jasanoff and Kim particularly attune to the institutional settings and material foundations through which imaginaries are reproduced and reformulated. People envision their futures within the material and normative infrastructures that are “the hard stuff of past achievement” (22). In other words, the past, or past generations’ visions of futures, are reified in various forms such as roads, power plants, and juridical practices, which inform and condition people’s hopes and desires for the future. The dialectics between past and future and the material and the ideal explain how sociotechnical imaginaries are both durable and changeable, enabling historical perspectives on modern societies’ technological and political construction.

In this dissertation, I will analyze how *nationalist imaginaries* at various scales condition and are conditioned by the production and circulation of “Korean” kimchi in China. By nationalist imaginaries, I refer to the collective visions of spatial, temporal, political, economic, and social orders of the nations, through which people make sense of their standing, make decisions in their lives, and make judgments on other people and places in the world. Nations function as foundational units in constructing imaginaries of the worlds, not only as communities with which people feel solidarity (Anderson 2006), but also as the framework through which people understand and evaluate events in other parts of the world. People make sense of their nation through comparison with other nations, as other nations are understood and imagined within political, economic, and cultural relations with “our nation.” The nationalist imaginaries of our and other nations condition and are conditioned by everyday encounters with people, things, and information (Tsing 2010), which are shaped by capitalist efforts to profit from their transborder flow. I will examine how nationalist imaginaries are

stabilized, reproduced, and reconfigured in conjunction with market practices and conditions and how the nation's future is envisioned within the material and economic conditions of the past and present (Jasanoff and Kim 2015).

The Coproduction of Value and Imaginaries

The dissertation attends to how imaginaries of nations and nationalities condition the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities and how commodities reproduce or reformulate imaginaries of nations and nationality. To borrow Jasanoff's idiom, I will examine the *coproduction* of commodity value and nationalist imaginaries through the case of "Korean" kimchi in China (Jasanoff 2004).

Coproduction is an idiom that seeks to contextualize the relationship between society and scientific knowledge production without falling into deterministic causal explanation or failing to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of natural and social orders. Jasanoff calls for attention to the modes in which social relations, material settings, and knowledge in and about the world are constituted, stabilized, and reformulated in their mutual (re)making and interactions (Jasanoff 2004). As Sunder Rajan warns, coproduction does not simply imply complexity or contingency (Sunder Rajan 2012, 8). The perspectives of coproduction facilitate historical, anthropological, and "structural" analyses of determining forces and processes (9-12). Or as Jasanoff puts it, coproduction facilitates critical analyses by "following power into places" (Jasanoff 2004, 42). The idiom of coproduction does not reproduce the rigid dualism of nature and society (Latour 2010). Instead, it attends to the multiplicity of worlding processes (Hastrup 2013) that are social and natural, objective and subjective, and epistemic and normative.

Thus, coproduction is a generative idiom that applies to various dimensions of worlding. For example, Sunder Rajan uses coproduction to explore “an emergent epistemic milieu in which both economics / capitalism and the life science / biotechnology are undergoing radical transformation” (Sunder Rajan 2012, 7): in other words, how life and capital are mutually embedded into one another (18-9). Jasanoff expands her coproductionist perspective to examine the relationship between the implementation of science and technology and collective imaginaries (Jasanoff and Kim 2015), which I introduced in the previous section.

Coproduction is a useful analytic device to examine formulations of the semiotic, material, and economic value of Korean kimchi in conjunction with political imaginaries of nations—particularly Korea and China. The Koreanness of kimchi, when communicated as intended, contributes to producing added value to commodities partly because of the positive images of Korea that are collectively held and reaffirmed among Chinese. At the same time, the production and circulation of Korean products contribute to positive images of Korea, which are conditioned by people’s understanding of geopolitical orders and affected by everyday encounters with Korean people, cultures, and things. As I will show in the dissertation, neither the formulation of value nor imaginaries of Korea are a stable process or status quo. Both products’ value and collective imaginaries are constantly subject to (re)making, which the idiom of coproduction presupposes. Imaginaries of Korea are far from being coherent, not only because “Korea” simultaneously and ambiguously refers to Korean nations, cultural entities, and ethnic groups (Chapter 1), but also because multiple imaginaries coexist “in tension or in a productive dialectic relationship” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4). Despite enormous efforts to stabilize the meanings (and value) of “Koreanness” in kimchi products, they can still be recontextualized and reappropriated for alternative

interpretations and market practices, thus requiring kimchi manufacturers' vigilant observation and rapid response.

The value of Korean kimchi and imaginaries of Korea are coproduced in Chinese kimchi markets, but often through messy and uncertain procedures characterized by confusion, disruption, miscommunication, and miscalculation (Tsing 2005; Serres 1982). The Koreanness of kimchi is promoted and interpreted in multiple ways without ever being agreed upon (Chapter 3); different expectations of the qualities of Korean kimchi disrupt communication and logistical coordination between the company and sales representatives (Chapter 4); political scandals radically transform the ways kimchi's Korean identity is perceived and evaluated by Chinese consumers (Chapter 2). Thus, just as *co-* in coproduction does not imply smooth and cooperative relations in multiple spheres of the world, *production* in coproduction does not mean the frictionless development of value or imaginaries.

In other words, this dissertation does not examine how positive imaginaries of Korea contribute to the production and circulation of Korean kimchi in China or vice versa—that is not what coproduction means, nor is that the way I use the idiom of coproduction for my ethnographic analysis. Instead, this dissertation attends to how correlations between the value of Korean kimchi and imaginaries of Korea are speculated upon, reflected, reaffirmed, challenged, and reconfigured at various scales and venues. Thus, I view *production* in the coproduction of value and imaginaries as a messy process of revision and remaking, destabilization and restabilization, challenge and response, in material, practical, symbolic, and discursive ways. I see *co-* in coproduction as contentious cohabitation, reinforcing and reconfiguring one another in unpredictable ways and not without risk of disruption, deterioration, and separation. In sum, I will examine the coproduction of value and imaginaries in terms of how it works

(reflexive and practical senses), how it should work (speculative and normative senses), and how it does not work (critical senses).

My “Korean” Labor and Paraethnographic Collaboration

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 at Tiantian Food as an unpaid employee. To be accurate, as a researcher I was granted access to observe and participate in some aspects of business operations at Tiantian Food, where I fit myself in the corporate labor regime and provided labor for the company. My position at Tiantian Food was unusual not only because I went to work every weekday from 8 to 5 despite being unpaid, but also because I was assigned to particular kinds of work in which my specialty and skills could be valorized. By elaborating how I simultaneously conducted fieldwork and worked at Tiantian Food, I will explain the situated perspectives (Sunder Rajan 2017) from which I came to study the coproduction of value and imaginaries in the Chinese kimchi industry, and what emerged as the empirical grounds of my ethnographic analyses.

I was interviewed by (yes, not interviewed) Song, a co-owner of Tiantian Food after being introduced by a South Korean businessman who had some connections with Song. Song was hesitant at first but eventually offered me a “desk” (See Chapter 3 for details). It was not a job because I was not paid. However, I was allowed to sit at the designated desk, talk with employees whenever I had a chance, and participate in some of Tiantian Food’s daily work. Since I was not paid, I was not forced to go to “work” every weekday. Sometimes I took advantage of this flexible arrangement to visit sales representatives in other cities, meet interlocutors outside the company, and take a short research residency in Beijing. It also allowed me to take a pause in my fieldwork when

my child was born. However, most weekdays during my fieldwork, I went to work every morning, just as Tiantian Food's office workers did. While at work, the owners Song and Choi assigned me a set of projects, and I followed their instructions. As time went by, other office workers asked me for a few "favours," little tasks they found challenging or that needed urgent attention.

In the beginning, I was assigned to the Design department. I had demonstrated my skills and experience in photography and design during the interview, and Song was looking to replace a designer who had recently left the company. Thus, for a significant period at Tiantian Food, I took product photographs and created new package design templates, which provided me opportunities to reflect on the aesthetic and logistical configuration of Korean qualities (Chapter 3). However, the division of labor among twenty office workers was not always clear-cut, which allowed me to observe and engage with other aspects of business operation at Tiantian Food. Song assigned me to conduct "field research" and compile "reports" for the problem the company faced, which helped me comprehend the logistical and communicative networks within and beyond the company (Chapter 4). I joined meetings with clients and partners, talked to them on the phone, followed-up with them through email, and met some of them at their own offices. I was often asked to translate Korean or English documents or to search for information not available on Chinese websites.

I worked at Tiantian Food as I continuously searched for opportunities to observe and participate in their business operations, while the company found several ways to make use of my voluntary "labor." For Tiantian Food, I was a worker who had the skillsets of a designer and photographer, literacy in English, and linguistic and cultural fluency in South Korea. Particularly, I was expected to be familiar with the "Korean" qualities that the company aspired to implement in their products, based on my

upbringing in South Korea and research experience in the Korean food industry. In other words, I was expected to be a Korean worker who could bring Korean perspectives and knowledge on Korean culture, society, and markets. Owing to their expectation of my Koreanness, I was given opportunities to materialize Korean aesthetics in product photos and package designs, to evaluate Tiantian's kimchi products with the (Korean-Chinese) owners' family, and to join business meetings and banquets with potential partners and clients from South Korea.

My ethnographic analysis of the Koreanness of kimchi is grounded in my collaborative relations with Tiantian Food as a Korean worker/researcher. My ethnographic perspective is situated within the interests, networks, and worldings of the company that aims to manufacture Korean qualities, meanings, and values for their business, which conditioned its expectations of me as a Korean worker. Thus, my fieldwork at Tiantian Food involved enmeshing my ethnographic perspectives with the *para-ethnographic* practices and perspectives of the company (Marcus 2011). In other words, I carefully *follow* the commodities to examine the complicated connections among multiple places, people, and times, as I engage with the ways people at Tiantian Food view, comprehend, and follow things and connections to make profits. Thus, in the dissertation, I focus less on examining how things, places, and times are interconnected in the Chinese kimchi industry; instead, I observe and analyze how people perceive, imagine, and act upon the interconnection among things, places, and times, which I conceptualize as the coproduction of commodity value and nationalist imaginaries.

Mediatization and Scaling

People do not just perceive, imagine, and act upon worlds “out there.” They read, watch, and listen about worlds through various forms of media. Their cities, nations, worlds, economies, politics, and cultures become perceivable, imaginable, and enactable as they read (or hear or watch), scrap, comment, and share the news. The (trans)national and (almost) simultaneous mediatization of events in the contemporary world (Mazzarella 2004) conditions the coproduction of commodity value and nationalist imaginaries, which I will explore closely in Chapter 2. This dissertation uses newspaper articles published in Korean and Mandarin for ethnographic analysis to contextualize my local(ized) encounters and examine patterns of *scaling* in the configuration of commodity value and imaginaries.

By scaling in conjunction with the mediatization of the contemporary worlds, I refer to three different yet related modes of scaling. First, the scaling of my interlocutors at Tiantian Food. Reading news of larger worlds helps them contextualize and respond to changes in the markets. They not only make sense of changes in their business through reading and learning from newspapers but also make changes proactively in their business based on what they read and learn about larger worlds. Thus, for my interlocutors, the news media is a tool for scaling up, incorporating various forces, variants, and actions, which are not directly observable or comprehensible in their localized encounters, into their purview.

Second, scaling for journalists. Journalists go to places, meet and talk with people, and review information, none of which is readily accessible to most of their readers. Journalists’ availability and accessibility to events, people, and information render their articles valuable commodities. Nevertheless, with fierce competition for readers’

attention (and economic reward from the readership) and complicated political consideration, journalists select the important events, opinions, and information to publish, build up the contexts of how and why they matter in relation to other events in the world, and delimit the boundaries of what they include in an article to construct a coherent and persuasive narrative. Thus, for journalists, scaling is not necessarily a problem of up or down (Hastrup 2013) but of implementing a perspective that resonates with the interests of readers, powers, and capital.

Third, scaling for ethnographers. Ethnographic research has been questioned for employing methodological conventions that may be unsuitable for comprehending dynamics at beyond-the-local scales—or what Jean and John Comaroff call the “awkward scale” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003). Methodological innovations in ethnography, such as multi-sited ethnography, not only facilitate theoretical and empirical analyses at multiple scales but also incorporate scaling—the ways of being and knowing in/of the world—as ethnographic objects (Hastrup 2013; Coleman and Hellermann 2011; Fortun 2009). Ethnographers engage with scaling as they design their research, which is conditioned by interlocutors’ scaling in their everyday life and work.

This dissertation explores how three different modes of scaling are conducive to one another. How do interlocutors at Tiantian Food make sense of their local(ized) encounters through reading and watching the news? How do I make sense of my ethnographic encounters through reading the articles my interlocutors cite? How do journalists’ scalings of worldly events reverberate with interlocutors’ and with my perspectives on the coproduction of value and imaginaries? By treating newspaper articles as part of my ethnographic materials while focusing on the modes of scaling in media production and consumption, I will examine how the local encounters I observed and participated in are configured in relation to larger socioeconomic and political

dynamics, and how connections between local encounters and macro-scale societal forces are envisioned and enacted in particular patterns and logics.

Overview of the Dissertation

This dissertation examines the coproduction of commodity value and nationalist imaginaries from various perspectives, focuses, and scales. Each chapter engages with different scales in which the commodity value and nationalist imaginaries are formulated, focusing on various tensions, problems, and challenges faced and narrated by people in the Chinese kimchi industry. The first two chapters situate imaginaries of “Korea” within historical and geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia. And the following two chapters examine how the imaginaries condition and are conditioned by the production and circulation of kimchi products. The first part engages with media representations of macro-scale events in China and South Korea. The second part focuses on the decision-making processes and business operation of Tiantian Food and its sales representatives. By ordering the chapters in this way, I do not attempt to “zoom in” from macro-scale geopolitics to micro-scale business practices. Instead, I start with explaining the modes and patterns of scaling that my interlocutors mobilize to comprehend the economic and political changes so that readers can approach macro-scale events I discuss in the following chapters as epistemological constructs, i.e., historically conditioned and mediatized representation of the worlds.

The first chapter, Reimagining “Korea”: The Topography of “Korea” in Korean Kimchi, Korean-Chinese, and Qingdao Koreatowns, explores the genealogies of nationalist imaginaries of Korea through navigating the histories of Korean kimchi, Korean-Chinese, and Qingdao Koreatowns. In this chapter, I trace the historical,

economic, and political conditions in which the Korean identities of kimchi, people, and places are articulated, challenged, and diversified. I juxtapose hegemonic imaginaries of Korea in South Korea with alternative claims to Korean identities by Korean diasporas and expatriates, who play important roles in the production and circulation of Korean kimchi in China.

The second chapter, Boycotting “Korea”: Extraordinary Boycotts and the Ordinary Imaginaries of Bordered Worlds, examines how nationalist imaginaries condition the production and circulation of Korean kimchi in China through the extraordinary situations of 2017. This chapter analyzes how diplomatic tension between South Korea and China developed into the nationwide boycotts of Korean products and how the boycotts affected Korean-Chinese businesses, including Tiantian Food and its partners. I discuss how the postnational aspirations of Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs, who want to reach both “Korean” and “Chinese” markets, are challenged by the territorial nationalist imaginaries of geopolitics, which were historically shaped by the Cold War and amplified through South Korean and Chinese media. The chapter describes Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs’ normative expectations of the coproduction of nationalist imaginaries and commodity value, which were articulated when their expectations were suddenly upended during the boycotts.

The third chapter, Designing Kimchi: Semiotic, Aesthetic, and Logistical Making of “Koreanness,” navigates the mechanisms in which Korean qualities are semiotically, aesthetically, and logistically configured to add value to kimchi products. This chapter describes three related aspects of design works I participated in: adding Korean product names to the packages, creating product photographs that visualize Korean characteristics, and innovative product designs to solve quality control problems. By exploring how various design practices are intended as an intervention in commodity

supply chains, I discuss how the perspective of design—analytical attention to conceptual labors of reflection, speculation, and intervention in the making of commodity supply chains—contributes to understanding the formulation of commodity value.

The last chapter, Reordering Orders: The Politics of Disjunctures in Logistics and Communication, attunes to the structure of communication and commands (“ordering”) that facilitate the manufacture and transportation of kimchi. By interrogating how the collaborative efforts to produce and promote “Korean” qualities reinforce ethnic, linguistic, and cultural hierarchies among participants of the commodity chains, I analyze the patterns of discrimination and stereotyping in economic relationships. Examining the conflicts, tensions, and problems in the communication between the production line and office and between the office and sales representatives, I interrogate the nature of labor and power relationship conditioned by the capitalist endeavors to produce Korean qualities and value.

In the conclusion, I summarize the central argument in the dissertation as I attempt to expand its conceptual and methodological frameworks for further research. Describing a few recent changes in Tiantian Food, I discuss how the experiences in the Chinese kimchi industry shape people’s visions of the future, especially the future of “China.”

Chapter 1

Reimagining “Korea”: The Topography of “Korea” in Korean Kimchi, Korean-Chinese, and Qingdao Koreatowns

Ding’s Answer

I was sitting with Mr. Ding, a Han Chinese kimchi factory owner, at his office from which he could monitor the production line through windows and via security cameras. He offered me a cup of *Maxim* instant coffee, which he thought I would like as a South Korean. It was my fifth interview with kimchi manufacturers in Qingdao that day, and the fifth *Maxim* I had. I would rather have had a cup of the tea he was drinking, but I quietly sipped the sweet, creamy South Korean instant coffee in a paper cup.

I asked him how he got into the Korean kimchi industry, and how he developed his relationship with South Korean clients. He did not mean to avoid answering my questions (later he returned to them), but my use of the phrase, “Korean kimchi” (*hanguo paocai*) clearly triggered something in him. Instead of answering my question, he offered me a lecture on why I should not say *hanguo paocai*. He started: it was true that his kimchi was mostly exported to South Korea, *hanguo*, and was made to appeal to the palate of South Korean consumers. However, his kimchi was made in China, with

Chinese ingredients and by Chinese workers, at his Chinese company. Therefore, *hanguo* is inaccurate to describe the origin and identity of his kimchi.

An alternative way to refer to Korea in Mandarin is *chaoxian*. Originally, this word referred to the last dynasty on the Korean peninsula before the Japanese colonial occupation. Now, a small variation is used to refer to North Korea (*beichaoxian*) as well as the ethnic Korean-Chinese minority (*chaoxianzu*). His company does not have any connection with North Korea or Korean-Chinese, so *chaoxian* is not appropriate, either. He concluded that *hanshi*, (South) Korean style,¹ was the right word that fits his products and any other kimchi products produced in China. Although the kimchi products manufactured in China emulate the visual and gastronomic qualities of kimchi made in South Korea, they could only be Korean in terms of style, not in origin or identity.

Then it remained whether *paocai* was the right word. He explained that *paocai* originally refers to Sichuanese pickled vegetables, which may have a resemblance or

¹ There are two Chinese characters referring to Korea: *han* (韩) and *chao* (朝). As I explained, *chao* in *chaoxian* is used to indicate North Korea (*beichaoxian*, lit. North *chaoxian*) or Korean-Chinese (*chaoxianzu*, lit. *chaoxian* ethnic group). *Han*, however, is exclusively used to indicate South Korea, *hanguo* (lit. *han* state). Since the establishment of South and North Korea in 1948, North Korea used the term *chosŏn* (Korean pronunciation of *chaoxian*) in their formal state name, while South Korea took the term *han* (Korean pronunciation of *han*, which is phonetically same in Korean and Mandarin). Both Koreas in principle do not recognize the other Korean government in the Korean peninsula, thus using their “Korean” term when referring to the other (illegitimate) Korean state. For example, South Koreans call North Korea *Puk’an*, lit. North *Han*, while North Koreans call South Korea *Nam Chosŏn*, lit. South *Chosŏn*. As an ally of North Korea, China conventionally used the term *nanchaoxian* (Mandarin pronunciation of *Nam Chosŏn*) when referring to South Korea, accepting the North Korean way of naming. However, since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992, China has partially adopted the South Korean way of naming, calling South Korea *hanguo* and North Korea *chaoxian*. Therefore, *hanshi*, by using the term *han* over *chao*, implies a South Korean style instead of a North Korean or Korean-Chinese one.

historical connection with Korean kimchi depending on how scholars interpret their origins. He was aware of efforts by the South Korean government to promote *xinqi* as the Mandarin term for kimchi to avoid unnecessary confusion or controversy. *Xinqi*, meaning “spicy and miraculous,” was a homophonic translation of kimchi in Mandarin, being carefully chosen from among 4,000 candidates by the South Korean Ministry for Food, Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries in 2013 with the help of linguists, traders, and embassy employees (H. Kim 2021). However, it did not sound right to Ding, and more importantly, he did not agree that kimchi was a completely different food from *paocai* in Sichuan. He found it offensive that South Koreans desperately distanced themselves from Chinese *paocai* by coining the unfamiliar and somehow funny-sounding word, disvaluing cultural exchanges and historical connections between the two countries. So, he settled on *hanshi paocai*, Korean-style kimchi, then asked me to repeat my question.

Korea's Kimchi, It's for Everyone

In November 2020, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) issued standards for *pao cai* (salted fermented vegetables) (ISO 2020), which rekindled the controversy over the origin and identity of kimchi in South Korea and China (BBC Travel 2020). Global Times (*huanqiushibao*), a Chinese newspaper known for its nationalist tone, triumphantly covered the news while highlighting how it would be humiliating for the South Korean kimchi industry (Global Times 2020). The ISO standard for *paocai* applies only to Sichuanese *paocai*, and specifies that the standard does not apply to Korean kimchi, which is conventionally referred to as *paocai* in Mandarin. Nevertheless, the Global Times article, which was translated and quoted by numerous South Korean newspapers, infuriated South Koreans who felt the increasing

presence of “China” in their economic and cultural lives (Kim and Ives 2020). Some South Koreans viewed it as a part of the Chinese government’s efforts to appropriate Korean history and culture (K. Chŏn 2021). Some blamed the South Korean government for its lack of effort to distinguish kimchi from *paocai*, because it did not sufficiently promote the term *xinqi* and most kimchi distributors in China stuck to the term *paocai* when referring to Korean kimchi (H. Kim 2021). Some felt the urgent necessity to promote the history and cultural identity of Korean kimchi “to the world,” by putting an advertisement in the *New York Times* with the slogan: “Korea’s Kimchi, It’s for Everyone” (H. Park 2021).

It was not usual to hear someone like Ding in the kimchi industry discussing what kimchi is, or whether and how it is Korean. The majority of kimchi produced by Chinese manufacturers was spicy kimchi made with napa cabbage, which they undoubtedly believed, assumed, or expected to be “Korean”—however they defined it to be so. Most producers and consumers of kimchi, either in South Korea or China, do not question either the term Korean kimchi or *hanguo paocai*, or the relationship between “Korean” and kimchi (*paocai*). Nevertheless, as Ding’s response as well as the recent *paocai* controversy reveal, the association between “Korea” and kimchi cannot always be taken for granted. Every once in a while, the association is questioned or challenged, and thus needs to be reestablished, as competing imaginaries of “Korea,” kimchi, and their relationship in history and cultures lurk behind the scenes—at least some think so.

The contentious status of “Korean” kimchi is often concealed by strong nationalist narratives and campaigns, which not only naturalize, reinforce, and reproduce the association between “Korea” and kimchi, but also articulate the imaginaries of “Korea” as a particular spatio-temporal configuration. In efforts to prove the historicity and uniqueness of Korean kimchi, or in attempts to assess the current status of Korean

kimchi in the world, certain historical periods, political regimes, and communities are selectively included or excluded as they reconfigure imaginaries of “Korea,” where Korean kimchi has been made, distributed, and consumed. The hegemonic nationalist imaginaries of “Korea” overshadow, but do not necessarily uproot alternative attempts to embody, reclaim, and reflect “Korea.” This ambiguity results in the development of “Korean” commodities, industries, and communities outside South Korea.

Inspired by Ding’s curiosity (while not necessarily settling down with his conclusive answer), in this chapter, I will pursue the questions of what kimchi is and how “Korea” is characterized as the origin and identity of kimchi. I will critically examine the historical and cultural studies of kimchi published in South Korea, explaining why research on kimchi has flourished since the 1990s and how that research has redefined the spatio-temporal boundaries of “Korea”. I will also introduce how the transnational mobility of people, things, and cultures came to influence the kimchi we know and eat today, as well as to condition nationalist imaginaries of “Korean” kimchi.

Then, I will turn my attention to how the concept of “Korea” is reproduced and reconfigured outside of South Korea, by following the histories of Korean-Chinese people and of Koreatown in Qingdao. Describing their history, I will focus on how alternative imaginaries of “Korea” constitute social, economic, and cultural relations among Koreans within the highly mobile and transnational populations/urban spaces.

By contextualizing the transnational mobilities that condition the making of Korean kimchi, Korean-Chinese, and Koreatowns in Qingdao, I will situate the development of the kimchi industry in China as part of nationalist, capitalist, and colonial projects to reimagine “Korea.” The kimchi industry in China has developed rapidly since the early 2000s, as the transborder mobilities of people, capital, and commodities made it possible to valorize emergent economic opportunities. Nevertheless, the transborder

mobilities of “Korean” people, capital, and commodities are conditioned by the colonial, Cold War, and neoliberal orders of Northeast Asia. Under geopolitical transformation in the 20th century, “Korea” becomes an idealized ethnic, cultural, and national entity to which multiple nation states, ethnic groups, and diasporic communities make partial and contentious claims. Thus, the association between Korea and kimchi needs to be examined within historical contexts in which multiple imaginaries of “Korea” and the transborder mobilities of “Korean” people, things, and capital are coproduced in the 20th century Northeast Asia.

Korean Kimchi: A Transnational History

Kimchi is one of the most well-known, popular, and widely consumed Korean foods in South and North Korea, overseas Korean communities, and beyond. Each South Korean consumes about 22.8 kg (50 pounds) of cabbage kimchi a year (S. Ch’ae 2016), which means that 3,000 tons of kimchi are consumed every day across a nation of 50 million people. Kimchi is served in almost every meal in homes and in most, if not every, Korean restaurant as a side dish. Many Koreans think that a table is not complete without kimchi (Pettid 2008, 47). They view this dish as an indispensable part of their life as Koreans. They associate kimchi’s taste, smell, and texture with unique national traditions (K. Han 2000). Kimchi is produced and consumed by Korean diaspora communities all over the world, even when its ingredients are not easy to obtain, and its taste and flavor are not welcomed by their non-Korean neighbors (Ku 2014). Some kimchi, either exported from South Korea or locally made by Korean diasporas and non-Koreans, reaches beyond the national and ethnic boundaries of “Korea” and is consumed (and welcomed) by non-Koreans.

So, what is kimchi? According to the Codex Alimentarius² standard for kimchi (CODEX Alimentarius 2001), kimchi refers to the product prepared from varieties of napa cabbage, which are processed with a seasoning mixture mainly consisting of red pepper powder and fermented before or after packaging. This spicy napa cabbage kimchi is what is commonly and conventionally known as kimchi, accounting for the majority of kimchi commercially produced in South Korea (and China). Other kinds of kimchi are made from various kinds of vegetables such as radish, cucumber, and basically anything that can be brined and preserved. While most kimchi in the markets is seasoned with red pepper powder, which gives kimchi a spicy flavor and bright red color, some varieties of kimchi are without red pepper powder, accommodating those who do not like or cannot tolerate spicy flavor. Fermentation is crucial not only for the unique taste and texture of kimchi but also for its preservation. However, kimchi is not the only kind of vegetable dish that uses fermentation, as fermentation has long been widely used for food preservation in different parts of the world.

In sum, kimchi can refer to various types of vegetable dishes made with seasoning and fermentation methods, which can be easily found in various parts of the world. However, kimchi commonly refers to spicy napa cabbage kimchi, which accounts for the majority of commercially produced and circulated kimchi in South Korea and beyond. It is also the type of kimchi that represents “Korean” kimchi, being featured in literature, commercials, and pamphlets that introduce “Korean” kimchi “to the world.” Thus, to answer the question “what is kimchi,” we need to understand the genealogy of

² CODEX Alimentarius is the international food standard for the food trade as established by the WHO and FAO (CODEX Alimentarius 2021).

kimchi as a general category as well as the socioeconomic conditions in which the spicy napa cabbage kimchi came to represent the whole category.

The Genealogy of Korean Kimchi

Some food goes through a radical transformation in its preparation, serving, and storage methods along with broader social, economic, and technological changes (Freidberg 2009). Nevertheless, its historical transformation has often not been well informed or documented, partially due to the gendered perception of food preparation as a mundane and monotonous subject (Giard 2002). The history of kimchi is no exception. Following this history is quite a complicated project, not only because there are very few historical records on food and cooking in Korea, but also because most of the records on Korean food and cooking were written in Chinese.³ The translation (in the broad sense) of Chinese texts into Korean contexts is often complicated and unclear (E. Park 2013).

Following the history of kimchi, especially as a way to understand how spicy napa cabbage kimchi became the most famous and popular kimchi, three questions need to be answered: 1) How did the recipe and method of kimchi making change over the years, especially in terms of fermentation skills? 2) Why and when did people start

³ The Korean alphabet or *hangul* was invented in the 15th century, but people in Korean peninsula used the native Korean language long before the invention of its own writing system. While there were a few phonetic writing systems for the Korean language, they were neither widely used nor adopted for official uses. Chinese was officially used for bureaucracy and documentation even though it was fundamentally different from Korean (Korean is a phonetic system while Chinese is a logographic system) and thus hard to learn for commoners with limited access to education. Even after the invention of *hangul*, Korean aristocrats resisted changes and kept writing and publishing in Chinese (Kim-Renaud 1997).

using red pepper in kimchi? 3) When did people (in the Korean peninsula) start making kimchi with napa cabbage?

Historians have long debated which Chinese character would refer to what we conventionally know as kimchi, whether the technique of preserving and fermenting vegetables was diffused from China to Korea, and whether we can call preserved (or fermented) vegetable dishes from a few centuries ago kimchi (E. Park 2013; D. Jang et al. 2015; C. Park 2019; Y. Joo 1994). If we focus on cooking methods, it seems evident that preserved/fermented vegetable dishes in the Korean peninsula were mainly made with fermented soybeans (*chang*) and salt. In contrast, Chinese and Japanese vegetable dishes mainly use vinegar and malted rice for preservation and fermentation (C. Park 2019). Based on this distinction, many scholars argue that uniquely “Korean” kimchi has existed for at least a thousand years, even though some cooking techniques might have been learned from China, and words referring to kimchi originated from China (J. Jang 1972; 1975; Y. Joo 1994; M. Kim et al 1997; C. Park 2019).

Kimchi went through some important changes in the last six hundred years. First, salted (fermented) seafood (*chōtkal*) was mixed in as a seasoning for kimchi as early as the 15th century. Second, red pepper (*koch’u*), which was brought into Korea in the 16th century, was widely used to make kimchi. The red pepper was effective in masking the fishy flavor of fermented seafood in the seasoning and, more importantly, helped lacto-fermentation of kimchi with less salt (C. Park 2019). Reducing the amount of salt with the help of red pepper was much needed for the less fortunate, who could not afford the high price of salt in the 18th and 19th centuries (Y. Joo 1994).⁴ With the introduction of

⁴ Young-ha Joo (1994) suggests that Koreans since the 18th century added pepper powder in kimchi to reduce the amount of salt needed to preserve vegetables because salt was expensive and hard for most commoners to obtain. Beginning in the 17th

red pepper and fermented seafood, kimchi became less salty, more *umami*, and of course, spicier.

Napa cabbage, now the main vegetable ingredient of kimchi, grew on the Korean peninsula but was not a popular vegetable for making kimchi before the 20th century. It was rare and expensive, making it only available to the rich and powerful, and used only for rituals. Napa cabbages in China were known for their good qualities among Koreans, but efforts to bring cabbage seeds from China and cultivate them in Korea mostly failed until the 19th century (C. Park 2019). Cabbage seeds from Shandong Province in China were brought into and cultivated in Korea by Chinese migrants, and production expanded during the Japanese colonial regime in the early 20th century. “Chinese” napa cabbage, compared with “Korean” napa cabbage, had more layers of leaves, a higher yield of production, and was less vulnerable to cold (Y. Joo 2013). For these reasons, the “Chinese” type cabbage and a hybrid of the “Chinese” and “Korean” type cabbages replaced indigenous “Korean” cabbage, and they came to be produced in South Korea on a massive scale (Y. Joo 2013; J. Jo 2016). Thus, as napa cabbage, once a luxury only available for a few, became affordable and accessible, kimchi made of napa cabbage became the most popular kimchi in South Korea since the 1960s (S. An 2010).

In sum, spicy napa cabbage kimchi, which we recognize as a quintessential “Korean” dish, has a relatively short history. The red pepper that gives kimchi its spicy flavor and red color was introduced around the 15th century, from America via the Portuguese or Japanese. Plump napa cabbage was introduced from China in the 19th century and became affordable and accessible only in the late 20th century. Some

century, as Confucian rituals requiring salted fish became more prevalent among the elite, the demand for salt radically increased. Poor commoners who could not afford enough salt used spicy pepper powder to preserve their kimchi and give it a taste that contrasted with bland steamed rice.

scholars of food culture and history claim that cabbage, pepper, and kimchi have existed for a very long time in Korean peninsula, disputing historical studies showing that spicy cabbage kimchi is a recent invention (D. Jang *et al.* 2015; D. Kwon *et al.* 2014).⁵ Nevertheless, whether they argue for the unchanged tradition of Korean kimchi or traditions in constant flux due to interactions with neighboring countries, scholars from both sides aim to construct a coherent narrative that kimchi is a uniquely Korean cultural product. C. Park (2019) and Y. Joo (1994) claim that spicy napa cabbage kimchi is a recent invention with influence from China and other regions, but at the same time distance themselves from food historians of the previous generation who argued that kimchi is from China (for example, J. Jang 1972; 1975, S. Lee 1975). Both Chae-lin Park (2019) and Young-ha Joo (1994) point out the limitation of their philological methods, suggesting that historians should focus on the cooking methods of kimchi in detail.

⁵ The two papers cited here are deeply problematic. D. Jang *et al.* (2015) argue that spicy cabbage kimchi existed a thousand years ago, criticizing Young-ha Joo for his “unscientific” claim that spicy cabbage kimchi came into existence only after the introduction of red pepper in the 15th century and cabbage in the 19th century. The historical record the authors offer as evidence of kimchi in the pre-Koryo dynasty (around the 9th century), is an obvious mistranslation. What authors thought was the word referring to kimchi in the record was used to refer to a kind of cruel corporal punishment. In addition, they fail to provide any evidence that Korean people made kimchi with cabbage before the 15th century, only suggesting that cabbage and red pepper would have existed long before the 15th century and Koreans could have made kimchi with the ingredients.

D. Kwon *et al.* (2014) argue that red pepper was not introduced from America but has existed in Korea for over a thousand years. They provide two forms of evidence: historical records, and recent scientific research that birds eat and carry pepper seeds. However, authors interpret the word referring to the broad category of pepper as evidence that red pepper existed in Korea for a longer period of time. The scientific research cited by the authors does not support their claim that red pepper was transferred by birds from America to the Korean peninsula.

By disputing claims that kimchi’s ingredients are not originally from the Korean peninsula, or that the method of making kimchi was introduced from China or other countries, the authors aim to construct “scientific” claims that kimchi “as we know it”—a spicy kimchi made with napa cabbage—has been made in Korea by Koreans for a very long time.

Instead, by emphasizing unique cooking techniques that were not used commonly in Japan or China—lacto-fermentation with a small amount of salt (C. Park 2019), or a combination of vegetables and seasonings (Y. Joo 1994; 2013)—they also attempt to construct a narrative that kimchi is quintessentially Korean.⁶

Pride and Threats: Nationalist Narratives of “Korean” Kimchi since the 1990s

Chae-lin Park (2013), in her overview of studies on kimchi, notes that research articles on the subject have exponentially increased since the 1990s. Among 2,615 pieces on cultural, social, historical, and scientific research on kimchi, 1,398 were published after 2000, and 911 were published during the 1990s. Only 97 articles were published before 1980 (C. Park 2013, 23). The statistics show that academic interest in kimchi dramatically increased during the 1990s, resulting in the rapid expansion of related research. The historical studies introduced in the previous section are also a part of the rapidly expanded literature on kimchi of the 1990s and later.

This surge in kimchi research is not a coincidence. It aligns with changes in the public perception of kimchi (K. Han 2000) and state support for the global promotion of Korean culture, which are more or less connected with the perception of “threats” to the cultural status of kimchi as a Korean food (H. Cho 2006; K. Han 2010). These conditions in and beyond South Korea reconfigured the cultural, economic, political, and symbolic

⁶ Chae-lin Park (2019) claims that lacto-fermentation techniques with a small amount of salt distinguishes kimchi from other kinds of preserved vegetable dishes in neighboring countries, such as Chinese dishes with vinegar and Japanese ones made with malted rice. Young-ha Joo (1994) argues that the skills used for preserving and fermenting foods are ubiquitously found all over the world, therefore kimchi’s unique (Korean) quality lies in the combination of ingredients, even though some of the core ingredients were introduced in Korea very recently.

status of kimchi as a cultural heritage and commodity. This changed status also altered how kimchi is studied in various disciplines and institutions in South Korea.

Although kimchi of various types has been made and consumed in Korea for a longer time, as the recent increase in research articles shows, it is a new phenomenon that kimchi is celebrated as representative of Korean culinary tradition. In earlier times, kimchi was often associated with the shameful and backward cultural identity of Koreans, because its pungent odor and taste was not so welcome to non-Korean visitors or neighbors (Ku 2014, 109-110; K. Han 2000). Kimchi was mostly made at home for household consumption, and its commercial production was limited to exceptional purposes, such as supplying canned kimchi to South Korean soldiers during the Vietnamese war (Cwiertka 2019), and to South Korean migrant workers in the Middle East (J. Jo 2016, 71-2). It was only around 1988, as South Korea hosted the Olympics for the first time, that kimchi was illuminated as a proud cultural heritage of Koreans worth promoting to foreigners, especially those who visited Seoul for the Olympics competitions. The popularity of kimchi among foreign athletes participating in the Olympics, along with the increase in the export of kimchi to Japan in the 1980s (J. Jo 2016), was interpreted as “international” recognition of kimchi, Korean culture, and South Korea as a nation (K. Han 2000; H. Cho 2006).

Simultaneously, kimchi was perceived to be in crisis for a couple of reasons. First, homemade kimchi was gradually being replaced by commercially produced kimchi on Korean tables. Commercial production of kimchi started as an export-oriented business targeting the Korean population abroad: soldiers in the Vietnamese war and later migrant workers in the Middle East. As migrant construction workers came back from the Middle East, South Korean kimchi manufacturers explored a new market in Japan, which turned out to be highly profitable (J. Jo 2016). The success of the export

encouraged expansion of the commercial production of kimchi and, ultimately, its domestic sales in South Korean markets.

On the other hand, more and more households, especially nuclear families in cities, chose to buy kimchi from stores rather than making it at home. Middle-class South Koreans in big cities consumed less kimchi as they incorporated “Western” food as part of their everyday diet. Many women, who had long been burdened with making a large amount of kimchi for their families, did not have time to do so because they increasingly worked outside the home (K. Han 2010).⁷ Cramped apartments in big cities, where the majority of urban middle-class Koreans lived, were not suitable for making a large amount of kimchi, which used to be made in an open space in traditional single-family houses (Y. Joo 1994, 124).

These connected socioeconomic changes conditioned the commercialized production and consumption of kimchi, which was perceived as a threat to the tradition of making and eating kimchi at home (K. Han 2010). The export of commercially produced kimchi or its consumption by foreigners was celebrated as a contribution to the positive images of South Korea and Korean culture. However, its domestic sales were seen as a threat to the longstanding tradition of making and consuming kimchi at home, reproducing patriarchal social values and repressive gender stereotypes.

⁷ Kyung-koo Han (2010) relates the commercialization of kimchi (and the “loss” of motherly love and affection in homemade kimchi) to the changing morality of married women, who are no longer forced to be thrifty and sacrificial, but are encouraged to be self-expressive and consumerist. Han’s analysis is not only based on anecdotal evidence, but also ignores the socioeconomic conditions in which a new moral disposition emerged at a particular time among a particular group of people. More importantly, Han dismisses how the burden of making kimchi, protecting tradition, and reproducing “motherly love” is exclusively imposed on women. Many laments on the loss of tradition, as in Han’s analysis, are blind to the patriarchal nature of the tradition.

Second, Japanese *kimuchi* challenged kimchi's cultural status as a Korean food—to be accurate, some reports misinterpreted a series of events and contributed to a public perception of a “threat” from “Japan.” What is commonly known as “the threat of Japanese *kimuchi*” can be explained this way: Japanese *kimuchi* is a “copycat” of kimchi, made in Japan. It is made with citric acid and various flavor enhancers instead of going through fermentation, so the Japanese product is quite different from the authentic Korean kimchi. The Japanese government attempted to register *kimuchi* on the CODEX, the international standards on food, and lobbied the Olympic Committee at the 1996 Atlanta games to designate *kimuchi* as the official Olympic food. Kimchi's reputation as a Korean food was seriously challenged because the export and sales of Japanese *kimuchi* overwhelmed those of Korean kimchi, accounting for 80% of the global kimchi market. In spite of Japan's attempts, the South Korean government succeeded in registering kimchi as the official Olympic food during the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and beat off Japan's attempt and triumphantly registered kimchi in the CODEX standard (Cwiertka 2019, 81-2; Feffer 2001; Ku 2014, 110-14; Ryang 2015, 1-2).

This narrative is based on a series of South Korean newspaper reports between 1994 and 2001, but they are only partially true. The Japanese government did lobby the Olympic Committee to promote Japanese *kimuchi* during the Atlanta Olympics, which alarmed the South Korean government and stimulated them to act quickly. However, it is simply not true that the Japanese government attempted to register *kimuchi* in the international food standard, a point that was quickly refuted by a statement from the South Korean government (Dong-a Ilbo 1994). The report about the vast exports of Japanese *kimuchi* was groundless; no statistical data on international trade shows that a significant amount of *kimuchi* was exported from Japan (C. Pak 1995). Nevertheless,

news that Japan was selling and promoting *kimuchi* globally incited public awareness and a sense of crisis among South Koreans.

In response, the South Korean government announced it would propose the international food standard on kimchi to CODEX, as an effort to promote kimchi as a Korean cultural heritage food and thus solidify its international sales (Dong-a Ilbo 1994). The establishment of the CODEX standard on kimchi in 2001, which was interpreted by Korean newspapers as “the triumph of Korean kimchi” and the “international recognition of kimchi as a Korean food” (K. Ko 2001), did not eliminate the possibility of Japanese *kimuchi* being exported under the name “kimchi,” or sold as *kimuchi* in Japanese domestic markets.

Third, importation of Made-in-China kimchi was perceived as an emergent threat to the kimchi industry in South Korea and to the cultural identity of kimchi. Made-in-China kimchi was priced cheaper than that of South Korea due to lower labor and materials costs. The price difference rapidly increased its market share both in the Japanese and South Korean markets after 2000. Many South Korean businesspeople, in collaboration with manufacturers in China, produced kimchi in Chinese factories and exported it to South Korea and Japan, the two largest kimchi markets in the world. Many restaurants and cafeterias in South Korea, which made or purchased kimchi in bulk for serving in small amounts to customers free of charge, replaced domestically produced or restaurant-produced kimchi with the cheaper Chinese products.

A series of newspaper reports and scandals highlighted the scale of Made-in-China kimchi imported to South Korea and consumed by South Koreans, as well as its inferior quality, a poor standard of hygiene in its manufacturing facilities, and safety issues (H. Cho 2006; K. Han 2010). Although the reports and scandals exaggerated the problems with Made-in-China kimchi, they contributed to the public perception that Made-in-

China kimchi is unclean and potentially hazardous.⁸ In addition, since South Korean kimchi manufacturers faced fierce competition in the domestic and Japanese markets, the changing trade balance of kimchi was imbued with new meaning. Despite the negative representation and perception of Made-in-China kimchi, the amount of imported kimchi from China barely declined as this controversy was raging, and the trade balance of kimchi has been unfavorable to Korea for more than a decade. The trade deficit, a consequence of importing more kimchi from China than exporting kimchi to Japan and other countries, was presented by South Korean newspapers as a sign of the endangered cultural status of Korean kimchi. In sum, the symbolic association between kimchi and (South) Korea was perceived to be weakened as more kimchi was made outside South Korea than inside of the country, and more South Koreans were eating kimchi from China.

Kimchi's cultural status in the South Korean public discursive sphere went through a dramatic transformation: from an emblem of shameful and backward cultural identity to a proud cultural heritage, which is now in crisis due to threats from Japanese *kimuchi* and Made-in-China kimchi (Ku 2014; K. Han 2010). The symbolic association between kimchi and the collective identity as (South) Koreans has been reinforced and reaffirmed, in part, because the nation's rapid economic development boosted South

⁸ There were a few newspaper articles that pointed out differences in taste between domestically-made kimchi and imported Chinese kimchi. They pointed out that Chinese kimchi tasted bitter because they used cheaper pepper powder containing too much pepper seed; cabbage was mushy as water was not properly squeezed out after brining; and Chinese kimchi contained less radish and green onion than Korean kimchi. However, the wide circulation of China-made kimchi was known to the public through reports on hygiene and health concerns regarding the imported kimchi. Thus, public interests in the difference in taste were largely overshadowed by hygiene and health concerns.

Koreans' pride in their own culture and encouraged them to reevaluate aspects of their cultural heritage such as kimchi (K. Han 2000).

What is “Korean” in Korean kimchi has been redefined as kimchi’s production and consumption have become rapidly commercialized, industrialized, and globalized over the last three decades. In these globalized market settings, the “Korean” identity of kimchi, or the symbolic association between kimchi and Koreanness, needs to be shored up by recognition from authoritative international organizations, by the preservation of the tradition of homemade kimchi (Cwiertka 2019), and most importantly, by its sales in foreign markets. In the commercial and industrial settings in which kimchi is produced and consumed globally, “Korean” kimchi means kimchi made with ingredients from South Korea, by South Korean workers in South Korean companies, and /or in the territory of South Korea—meeting the standards so that its country of origin is marked as “Made in (South) Korea.” The international sales of “Made-in-Korea” kimchi, especially in comparison with the Made-in-China product, is now perceived as the sign of international recognition of kimchi’s Korean identity, which reinforces and reaffirms the symbolic association between kimchi and Koreanness.

Through the changes by which the Koreanness of kimchi is redefined, “Korea” as an ethnic and cultural collective is also redefined as the territorial and economic collective of “South Korea,” clearly demarcating the boundary that excludes North Korea and Korean diaspora communities all over the world. But such a rhetorical configuration in the South Korean public sphere cannot negate the existence of “Koreans” beyond South Korea, their practices of making, consuming, and connecting with kimchi, or their footing in global markets as kimchi manufacturers.

Korean-Chinese: People who Cross Borders

In spite of negative perceptions of Made-in-China kimchi in South Korea, the kimchi industry in China grew rapidly in the 2000s. Many kimchi factories in earlier days were established and run by South Koreans, who had knowledge and experience in kimchi manufacture and/or connections with the South Korean kimchi markets. A few South Korean-owned kimchi companies remain, but the majority of kimchi companies are now owned and run by Han Chinese, including the largest kimchi company in Qingdao. Many Han Chinese-owned kimchi companies ask their South Korean clients to provide recipes and package designs. Clients are also responsible for quality control, and they often dispatch Korean-Chinese “technicians” (*jishuyuan*) to supervise the manufacturing processes in factories. In other words, most Han Chinese-owned kimchi companies limit their role to manufacturing a large amount of kimchi to specification at a competitive price, which is what South Korean clients want from “Chinese” kimchi manufacturers.

Nevertheless, when pinpointing the companies that sell kimchi in domestic Chinese markets, the leading companies are either owned by South Korean or ethnic Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs. They also started their businesses as kimchi manufacturers *for* South Korean clients, making kimchi based on clients’ recipes and under the clients’ brands. Although they still conduct an outsourced manufacturing business, they have also developed their own recipes and brands for the products they now sell in domestic Chinese markets. To support and increase profits, they have created nationwide sales networks, partnering with Korean-Chinese wholesalers in major Chinese cities who supply kimchi to supermarkets and restaurants in their regions. More recently, these companies compete with one another on online shopping websites, reaching more

“Chinese” consumers who are interested in exotic, authentic, and healthy “Korean” foods.

Korean-Chinese-owned kimchi companies are among many Korean-Chinese businesses emerging in major Chinese cities. In South Korea, Korean-Chinese people are stereotyped as low-income migrant workers found mostly in blue-collar jobs or service industries, who come to South Korea to pursue “our” money (J. Kwon 2015, 2018; J. Kim 2016; H. Park 2015). However, in many coastal Chinese cities like Qingdao, many Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs run their own shops or businesses, like Song and Choi do at Tiantian Foods. Almost everyone in the Korean-Chinese business community calls each other *hoejang* (president or CEO), *sajang* (president for smaller companies), *taep'yo* (representative), or *isa* (board member), no matter how small the business they run.

The sources of the money these entrepreneurs put in play often come from having worked in South Korea, or working for South Korean companies in China as translators or middle-level managers, or using investments from their parents, relatives, or friends. They run businesses such as restaurants, supermarkets, bars, karaoke clubs, massage parlors, designated driver services, retail, wholesale, manufacturing, import and export, private lending, and foreign currency exchanges. For many of them, their clients and customers are mainly those living in ethnic Korean enclaves. They make, distribute, or sell “Korean” products or services that “Koreans” want, or, as many Korean and Korean-Chinese put it, “earning money from other Koreans.”

The formation of the Korean-Chinese petty-capitalist class in coastal Chinese cities is conditioned by two different but related movements of Korean population: domestic migration of ethnic Korean-Chinese citizens and transnational migration of South Koreans. Since the early 1990s, as the diplomatic relationship between South Korea and

the People's Republic of China was established after four decades of Cold War-driven tension, many South Koreans moved to coastal Chinese cities like Qingdao, Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. South Korean factories and businesses also attracted many Korean-Chinese from autonomous prefectures in the Northeast to coastal cities. The movements of Korean-Chinese and South Koreans into Chinese coastal cities, where they created ethnic Korean enclaves and "earned money from other Koreans," are better understood through transnational historical contexts. Who are the Koreans moving from their hometowns to those cities, and how and why did those cities become the hosts of ethnic Korean enclaves? More importantly, how do the imaginaries of "Korea" (and "China") condition their movements in particular patterns and structures? To answer these questions, I will examine the historical conditions in which Korean-Chinese migrants moved into Qingdao and became petty capitalists, such that Qingdao has become a Korean city where South Koreans and Korean-Chinese have created large ethnic enclaves.

Historicizing the Mobility of Korean-Chinese

Korean-Chinese (*chaoxianzu* / *chosŏnjok*) are one of 55 ethnic minority groups (*shaoshuminzu*) in the People's Republic of China. Like the Uighur in Xinjiang and Tibetans in Xizang, Korean-Chinese have their own self-governing region in Northeast China called Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (*yanbian chaoxianzu zizhizhou*).⁹ The Korean-Chinese population numbers about 2 million, one of the largest Korean diaspora groups other than Korean Americans. Less than half of Korean-Chinese

⁹ Xinjiang and Xizang are Autonomous Regions (*zizhiqu*) at the Province (*sheng*) level, but Yanbian is an Autonomous Prefecture (*zizhizhou*) under Jilin Province.

currently live in the Yanbian prefecture or nearby Korean Autonomous Region. Some Korean-Chinese have recovered their nationality and permanently returned to South Korea. Some have become migrant workers in South Korea, moving back and forth between South Korea and Yanbian. Some have resettled in other Chinese cities or countries other than China or South Korea.

Who are the Korean-Chinese? What ethnic, national, and cultural connections tie them to Korea and China? To understand the historical and geopolitical configuration of their recognized identities, we first need to understand the conditions of their transborder mobility. Currently, the border between China and North Korea largely converges with two rivers between the two nations—the *Yalu* (*Amrok* in Korean) river and the *Tumen* (*Tuman* in Korean) river. Historically these two rivers conventionally served as territorial borders between the Chinese and Korean states over the last thousand years (The Editorial Board of Chosŏnjok History 1989, 26). However, for both states the region around the rivers was a nomadland where sovereign control did not always reach, and people could and did readily move across borders (the rivers) for economic and political reasons (S. Jung 2010).¹⁰

When Manchus established the Qing dynasty in the 17th century, they “sealed” the north side of the rivers—Manchuria—to demarcate their own ancestors’ birthplace. The policy did not completely ban Koreans (and Chinese) from foraging, logging, and hunting in the zone (The Editorial Board of Chosŏnjok History 1989, 26-7; Sun 2009). In the late Qing, the Manchu court lifted the ban and allowed (and encouraged) Koreans to come and settle in Manchuria, as many Koreans wanted to get away from poverty and

¹⁰ Sungmi Jung elaborates that some parts of the rivers were shallow enough to walk across, thus people around the rivers had had social and economic interactions for a long time. Crossing rivers for foraging, logging, and hunting was quite common in the area, although transgressors were severely punished when caught.

political turmoil and to grow rice on their own land (The Editorial Board of Chosŏnjok History 1989, 28).¹¹ Koreans promoted rice production in Manchuria since the late 19th century as they brought the knowledge and technology to develop wet rice paddies fields, which Chinese and Manchurians in the area had not done (Y. Kim 2011; The Editorial Board of Chosŏnjok History 1989, 35).¹² More Koreans continued to move to Northeast China for much of the early 20th century. This included not only those living near the rivers but also those from the southern parts of the Korean peninsula. Many Koreans lost their lands under the Japanese colonial regime or wanted to join the independence army based in Manchuria. Some Koreans moved to China involuntarily when Japan established a puppet state called Manchukuo in Northeast China and drafted Koreans to settle there (J. Kim 2011).

After the Japanese lost World War II and retreated from China and Korea, about 700,000 Koreans then living in China returned to the Korean peninsula. However, more than 1.4 million Koreans stayed in the region. Many joined the People's Liberation

¹¹ Although Manchuria was “sealed,” most Koreans did not intend to move permanently; they only crossed the border to meet urgent needs. Around the mid- and late-19th century, when the ban was lifted by the Qing court, Koreans moved to Manchuria on a permanent basis (S. Jung 2011). On migration during the “seal” and after, see: Haksŏng Im (2010).

¹² Yŏngshin Kim argues that historical studies of the Manchu by South Koreans narrowly focus on the migration of Koreans, ignoring the socioeconomic conditions in Manchu that facilitated their migration and settlement. Y. Kim emphasizes that the Qing dynasty encouraged (or at least allowed) people in Huabei to move to Manchuria, and about 20 million Chinese moved to Manchuria between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The massive migration significantly contributed to the development of farmlands in Manchuria, making the Chinese Northeast one of the most important agricultural production centers in Northeast Asia.

Sungmi Jung (2011), however, argues that many Chinese workers who moved to Manchuria did not plan to stay permanently. Many sold their land to Koreans, who had more experience in irrigation and farming (108). Chinese authorities recognized Koreans' land ownership if they dressed and cut their hair like Manchus (i.e., naturalized as Chinese/Manchu). Those who refused to do so were often deprived of their lands or were forced to cut their hair (123).

Army (the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s Army) during the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Their contribution was rewarded with a self-governing prefecture in the Yanbian area, a region near the Tumen river where the majority of the Korean population was concentrated.¹³ They obtained Chinese citizenship in the newly established communist Chinese state and were officially recognized as an ethnic minority group of Koreans, *chaoxianzu* (Korean-Chinese).

These Korean migrants' "choices" to become Chinese citizens as an ethnic minority were entangled with complicated economic and political calculations. Even when they could go back to their "liberated" fatherland, many poor Korean farmers could not afford to return because they were waiting for harvest. Middle-aged Koreans had social and economic roots in Yanbian and did not want to risk losing them or undergoing the struggle to make a fresh start (H. Im 2003, 198). They were also attracted to the CCP's promises of land redistribution and self-governance, for which reason some Koreans had joined the CCP and participated in the wars. In sum, Koreans in Northeastern China stayed and became Korean-Chinese for different reasons, but their "choices" do not fully reflect the dilemma—they had political, economic, and affective ties to both countries and had to consider uncertainties stemming from the geopolitical reordering in Northeast Asia.

¹³ The official history of Korean-Chinese in the PRC emphasizes the exploitation and discrimination Korean-Chinese experienced under the Nationalist and warlord regimes, in contrast to the CCP which encouraged ethnic minorities' self-determination and self-governance. For example, Sun (2009) argues that Korean-Chinese had a better relationship with the CCP than with the Nationalist Party because they had fought against the Japanese in Northeast China. Sun emphasizes that the Nationalist Party had tried to confiscate Korean properties and repatriate Koreans in Manchuria to Korea after World War II, before they realized that rice production in Manchuria would be jeopardized if Korean farmers left.

The process of Korean-Chinese becoming Chinese citizens as Korean ethnic minorities was never finalized. The potential of “return” always haunted Korean-Chinese, stymieing full incorporation. Koreans in Northeastern China were attracted to the CCP’s political agendas because the CCP promised self-governance (*zizhi*) and self-determination (*zijue*) for ethnic minority groups. When the CCP finally established the People’s Republic of China, some Koreans in Northeastern China demanded the right to establish their own country in Yanbian, which was a form of self-governance and self-determination to which they aspired. Some Koreans admitted that the request for an independent country was unrealistic but wanted official recognition of their ties with the fatherland as a form of dual nationality (H. Im 2003, 236-251). Neither of these programs requested by Koreans in China was approved. Instead, they were granted a degree of self-governance and self-determination as ethnic minorities with Chinese citizenship. In other words, their Korean identity was founded on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic characteristics within the new multiethnic and multicultural Chinese state, instead of their political and economic ties to Korea—neither South nor North.

Nevertheless, as Jaeun Kim (2016) elaborates, Korean-Chinese adeptly maintained ties with their Korean fatherlands with the support, tolerance, and/or restrictions from the Chinese state. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Korean-Chinese moved to North Korea to participate in postwar reconstruction projects, or to escape from the political turmoil of the early decades of the PRC when their commitment to the Chinese state and communist ideologies was suspected and criticized. Most of them later “returned” to Northeastern China for political reasons, but it is noteworthy that Korean-Chinese moved across borders between North Korea and China during a time when the Chinese state was very effective in limiting the domestic and transnational mobility of most of its people (J. Kim 2016, 126-30).

Unlike North Korea, which has long been an ally of the PRC as a fellow socialist state, travel to South Korea was an almost impossible and unthinkable reach for most Korean-Chinese during the Cold War. When a diplomatic relationship between South Korea and China was officially established in 1992, some Korean-Chinese went to see their family and relatives whom they had been unable to visit for decades. The “return” of Korean-Chinese to their South Korean families and hometowns was narrated in South Korea as a sentimental gesture of national reunion and postcolonial/Cold War reparation. However, as Hyun Ok Park (2015) analyzes, the return of Korean-Chinese since the 1990s was also a capitalistic dilemma. Soon after the opening of borders between South Korea and China, many Korean-Chinese actively sought economic opportunities in South Korea, where they could earn much higher incomes than in Northeastern China. The South Korean government was reluctant to embrace the return of Korean-Chinese as warmly as they did Korean Americans, worrying that they would potentially cause over-competition in blue-collar labor markets. Still, Korean-Chinese went to South Korea and provided cheap labor in construction sites, restaurants, hospitals, and households, which are crucial for sustaining neoliberal market orders in South Korea (H. Park 2015). The series of legislative battles and revisions regarding the status of Korean-Chinese in South Korea (J. Kim 2016; H. Park 2015) reveal the complicated political, economic, and social contexts in which Korean-Chinese transborder mobility is situated across South Korea and China.

Korean-Chinese actively sought opportunities in South Korea partly because their hometowns in Northeastern China were in economic decline, or because they were alienated from the rapid postsocialist economic development in coastal Chinese cities (M. Cho 2013; K. Park 2008). Therefore, although South Korea attracted many Korean-Chinese searching for better economic opportunities, many also moved to other

countries such as the United States, Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as well as other Chinese cities where many South Korean companies and expatriates were concentrated (K. Park 2008). Whether in other Chinese cities or foreign countries, most Korean-Chinese rely on, or are incorporated into “Korean” ethnic enclaves where South Koreans, North Koreans, and Korean diaspora groups are bound together and consume Korean foods, everyday goods, and other services customized for Korean needs (H. Kim 2008). Although not without discrimination and tension among those from different “Koreas”, shared language, customs, and cultural dispositions condition economic opportunities for those who seek higher incomes in economically-developed regions yet do not have linguistic skills, educational backgrounds, specialties, or social connections to be incorporated into mainstream economies in destination countries.

Thus, whether they have migrated to South Korea, other Chinese cities, or other foreign countries, the postsocialist migration of Korean-Chinese since the 1990s is what Hyun Ok Park calls capitalist devolution—privatized and commodified ways of achieving utopian socialist goals (H. Park 2015, 110). It was also “returns” to the Korean communities Korean-Chinese have longed for, although the “Koreas” they rejoin are in deterritorialized, hybrid, and transnational formations (Appadurai 1996; 1993). Uniquely patterned by the unequal distribution of wealth in the world as well as an affective (and pragmatic) commitment to ethnic-national communality, the transborder mobility of the Korean-Chinese population can best be understood within the context of the transborder mobility of South Korean capital, which accompanies the movements of South Korean people and corporations.

Qingdao's Koreatowns: The Mimicry of Colonialism

“Cheongdo-shi [Korean pronunciation of the City of Qingdao] in South Korea,” (S. Ch’a 2004)

“China’s Los Angeles,” (P. I 2007)

“When a cock crows in Qingdao, it can be heard in Incheon [a coastal city in South Korea].” (K. Song 2008)

These phrases are often used when introducing Qingdao in South Korean newspapers, epitomizing the geographic, cultural, and economic proximity between Qingdao and South Korea. Before the COVID-19 pandemic there were about 42 flights between Qingdao and major South Korean cities every day (The Korean Economic Daily 2020), and three round-trip ferries between Qingdao and Incheon every week. An hour-and-a-half flight from Qingdao to Incheon is shorter than flights to domestic cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Many South Koreans feel “comfortable” since the city looks much like another South Korean city, both in terms of urban planning and public signs in Korean (S. Kim 2005). It is not difficult to find Korean restaurants and stores selling goods imported from South Korea. Qingdao has several “Koreatowns” where people do not need to speak Mandarin at all for everyday life and even business (G. Choi 2004).

South Koreans moved to Qingdao even before diplomatic relations between South Korea and China were established in 1992. The very first South Korean company, established in Qingdao in 1989, manufactured audio equipment and exported items through Hong Kong because there was no cargo ship travelling between mainland China and South Korea (JoongAng Ilbo 2012; Qingdao Bureau of Commerce 2013). After diplomatic relations were established between South Korea and China, many South Korean companies moved to establish Chinese branches or manufacturing plants and

founded new South Korean companies in Qingdao in the 1990s and early 2000s. In its heyday in the early 2000s, more than 100,000 South Koreans lived and worked in Qingdao. More than 10,000 South Korean companies and over 500 restaurants were owned or run by South Koreans (C. Chǒng 2012).¹⁴ With the inflow of South Korean capital, companies, and people, more than 100,000 Korean-Chinese also moved to Qingdao, either to work for South Korean companies or to establish their own businesses.

Koreans are not the first group of “foreigners” who have exerted a strong presence in Qingdao. In 1897, in retaliation for the murder of two German missionaries in Shandong Province, Germany sent battleships and quickly seized the Jiaozhou Bay area, including the current Qingdao. After negotiating with the Qing administration in Beijing, the village of Qingdao and several large towns nearby were “leased” to Germany for 99 years in reparation (Steinmetz 2007, 435-6). During its colonial occupation, which abruptly ended with the Japanese invasion in 1914 (507), the German colonial state heavily invested in building railroads, which were crucial for Germany’s economic and military expansion into the interior of Shandong Province. The German colonial administration also invested in urban infrastructure, at the same time enforcing spatial and legal separation between Chinese and German residents (438-445).

¹⁴ It should be noted that these are rough estimates since there are no official statistics on “South Korean companies” or “Korean restaurants” defined by the nationality of owners. The article states that there might be more de facto companies and restaurants owned by South Koreans because they invested money and ran the business while appointing Chinese (or Korean-Chinese) chairmen for legal reasons. On the other hand, these are numbers that represent the peak of the “Korean boom” in Qingdao, being given by South Koreans in Qingdao who miss the good old times. Thus, the numbers might be inaccurate for various reasons, but reflect how the past is romantically presented in the form of numbers.

The Japanese took control of Qingdao during the two World Wars, between 1914 and 1922, and again between 1938 and 1945. During the Japanese regimes, the Japanese colonial state focused on industrial development in the city, including the production of heavy machinery (Zhang and Rasiah 2013, 592). The current urban and industrial organizations in Qingdao do not deviate much from the original plans and initial development set up by German and Japanese colonial states. “European style” mansions, churches, and administrative buildings built during the German colonial period remain and attract millions of tourists to Qingdao. Heavy industry plants are concentrated to the north of the city center, following the spatial development pattern set up by the Japanese colonial state (592).

As South Koreans flooded Qingdao beginning in the 1990s, most chose Qingdao with its cheaper labor and materials for its light manufacturing industries such as textile production, which had become prominent during the pre-reform socialist regime, as well as for its logistical infrastructure such as the Qingdao port (593). According to Jaesok Kim, who examines South Korean apparel manufacturers’ relocation to Qingdao, many South Korean light industry companies actively sought alternative sources for cheaper labor because South Korean wages had sharply increased as a result of nationwide strikes in 1987. By relocating to Qingdao, South Korean companies attempted to preserve their role as competitive manufacturers for the prominent global brand-name companies, which had chosen them for their capacity to quickly manufacture products more cheaply than was possible in North America or Europe (J. Kim 2013, 24-7). Using a cheaper labor force and materials in China, they continued producing various products like textiles, apparel, shoes, bags, and automobile parts in Qingdao. Qingdao was an ideal location for those companies because the city

government actively sought to attract foreign investment, providing them with tax incentives and other privileges (Zhang and Rasiah 2013, 592).

Not all South Korean companies moved to China just to lower the cost of production. Some conglomerates, especially in food industries, established their Chinese branches and plants with the long-term plan of expanding sales in Chinese markets (K. Ch'ae 1997; I. Hong and M. Pak 1997; K. Kim 1997; S. Kim 1997). They still focused on manufacturing products for export to South Korea or other developed countries, for which they benefitted from the lower cost of production. However, they justified their relocation or expansion not only in terms of preserving their past or present modes of business but also based on their optimistic speculation for the future.

Among the industries that relocated from South Korea to Qingdao, the jewelry industry was most prominent both in numbers and the accompanying socioeconomic changes their relocation created. South Korean jewelry companies produced fashion accessories for American and European fashion brands, achieving great success in meeting clients' requests for manufacturing large numbers of accessories within a short period without mistakes or compromising quality. Like other labor-intensive industries in South Korea, jewelry companies moved to China to lower production costs. Most of them—about 1,000 of the 1,200 South Korean jewelry companies—moved from South Korea to Qingdao in the 1990s and early 2000s (C. Chǒng 2012). They all moved to Qingdao around the same time to compete with other South Korean manufacturers who had already moved to China and were offering lower prices to their clients, or because their American clients urged them to relocate and lower the cost for them.

The South Korean jewelry workshops were concentrated in the Chengyang district, located at the northwest outskirts of Qingdao's city center. Chengyang was designated as a district (*qu*) of the city of Qingdao in 1994, combining 8 rural towns

(*zhen*) surrounding the city. Chengyang district was planned to function as a residential, commercial, industrial, and logistical center for the northwestern region of the city, promoting a transition from an agriculture-based economy to a manufacturing and service industry-oriented economy (Political Consultative Committee of Qingdao Chengyang 2000). Within just 10 years, a rural area with no roads, sewage, or other basic urban infrastructure became one of the most important commercial and industrial centers in Qingdao. Many South Korean companies, including jewelry companies, established their plants and workshops in Chengyang, since the rent and other costs for building plants were relatively low. The district government provided various privileges to attract investment from South Korean companies, and the district came to be well connected with highways and an airport.

Many South Koreans who moved to Qingdao in the 1990s chose to live in the downtown area of Qingdao, even though their factories were located in Chengyang or other outskirt areas of the city. In the city center, many South Korean businesspeople and students were concentrated in the apartment complex called *Hong Kong Gardens* (*xiangganghuayuan*), where they could not only rent apartments for shorter terms, but they also could easily find Korean restaurants, supermarkets, hair salons, and cram schools within the compound (J. Koo 2013a). Korean-Chinese who worked in South Korean companies or started their own Korean businesses in Qingdao lived in the area called *Licun*, a traditional market center between downtown Qingdao and Chengyang. Korean-Chinese chose *Licun* not only because there were cheaper housing options but also they could easily access many career centers (*chigöpsogaeso* or *laowuzhongjie*) and Korean stalls in the area.

However, around the time many South Korean jewelry companies relocated to Chengyang in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, Chengyang became a well-connected,

nicely planned urban center with brand-new apartments and modern urban infrastructures. The new apartments in Chengyang attracted South Korean and Korean-Chinese populations already residing in Qingdao, not only because they were cheaper than downtown apartments and closer to their workplaces and the airport, but also because they provided Korean interior options or more spacious units, ownership of which would qualify them for household registration in Qingdao (C. Chǒng 2012).¹⁵ Thus, many new South Koreans and Korean-Chinese settled in Chengyang both for work and home, while South Koreans in the downtown area and Korean-Chinese in *licun* gradually moved to Chengyang. Accordingly, restaurants, supermarkets, pubs, karaoke bars, and indoor driving ranges opened up or moved near the new “Koreatowns” in Chengyang. Many business associations such as the South Korean Business Association, Korean-Chinese Business Association, and Jewelry Business Association, high school and university alumni clubs, and hometown-based associations were organized to connect South Korean and Korean-Chinese businesspeople in Chengyang (Yonhap News Agency 2005). Even the South Korean embassy in Qingdao was relocated to Chengyang in 2015 because the majority of South Koreans left downtown and instead settled in Chengyang.

Chengyang was not officially planned to be a “Koreatown,” although socioeconomic conditions in South Korea and China facilitated the movement and settlement of Koreans in this district. In its heyday in the early 2000s, about 200,000 South Koreans and Korean-Chinese lived and/or worked in Chengyang, about 25% of the entire population in the district. South Koreans still living in Chengyang remember

¹⁵ With revised regulations on the household registration system (*hukou*), Korean-Chinese from Northeastern China could obtain household registration in Qingdao if they purchased an apartment larger than 100 square-meters (Tongp’o Town News 2007).

the early 2000s as the good old days with “too many Koreans.” A South Korean jewelry businessman recalled that there were too many (South Korean) Jewelry Business Association members participating in their annual golf competition, so they had to hold two competitions in series. Karaoke owners made a fortune as their Korean clients waited hours for admittance. Foreign currency dealers made “easy” money with informal (and illegal) currency exchange services they provided to South Korean businesspeople. South Korean businesspeople invited European and American clients to their new manufacturing plants in Qingdao, treating them to authentic Korean foods, drinks, and karaoke. South Korean newspapers described the emerging Koreatown where people “get their South Korean milk and newspapers at their doors every morning, watch South Korean televisions with parabolic antennas, and have *tchajangmyŏn* [black bean-paste noodle] delivered from local “Korean-style” Chinese restaurants” (C. Chŏng 2012).

However, Chengyang’s Koreatown experienced a tumultuous change in the late 2000s. In 2006, the Chinese government changed its policies on foreign investment, focusing on attracting large-scale foreign investment in high value-added, high-tech, and environmentally-friendly industries, while reducing or discontinuing support and privileges for small-scale and labor-intensive foreign businesses (S. Hong 2005). In 2008, the labor agreement statutes in China were revised to protect the rights of Chinese workers, by mandating written documents for labor contracts and provision of severance pay and retirement plans (Y. Cho 2007a; Y. Cho 2007b; Jing 2008). These policy changes in foreign investment and labor management increased production costs for labor-intensive South Korean manufacturing businesses, which had pushed from South Korea to relocate in China. Some companies quickly moved to less tightly regulated inland Chinese towns or Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam.

However, for many companies the changes were too sudden for orderly closure. Owners abandoned their plants and abruptly left China without paying outstanding wages, payments, and debts (T. I 2008; T. Kim 2008; Maeil Business Newspaper 2008; Yonhap News Agency 2008a, 2008b).

In 2007, 87 South Korean companies *fled* Qingdao—*yabandoju* in Korean, meaning “fleeing in the middle of night”—abandoning their plants and leaving their employees, suppliers, and banks unpaid (C. I 2008b; Yonhap News Agency 2007). Workers arrived at their workplaces in the morning and found them closed. They could not find the managerial-level workers—mostly South Koreans—who were in charge of their payrolls. The fleeing of South Korean companies not only affected those in direct relations with them but also other Koreans who remained in Qingdao. Local banks became reluctant to make loans to South Korean companies, or even required them to pay back existing loans in advance (C. I 2008a; C. Kim 2007). Small Korean businesses struggled with the new negative images of Koreans, who were perceived as lacking commitment and untrustworthy (J. Koo 2013a). The hostile atmosphere made it even harder for South Koreans to stay afloat through policy changes and the global financial crisis, forcing still more South Koreans to leave Qingdao.

According to *Index on Overseas Koreans* published by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 85,000 South Koreans lived in Qingdao in 2007 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007, 66). The number declined to 66,650 in 2009, and 48,200 in 2011 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011). The latest statistics (for 2019) show that 29,894 South Koreans currently live in Qingdao (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019, 73), a decrease of 65% over the course of a decade. Many South Korean businesspeople said that South Korean communities in Qingdao shrank to almost nonexistence. It has become almost impossible to find textile, bag, or apparel factories

run by South Koreans in Qingdao. The South Korean Jewelry Business Association now finds it challenging to secure enough members to hold an annual golf competition. The South Korean Small Business Association President was concerned about the fate of his association because many members failed to “survive (*saranamda*)” another year and returned to South Korea.

As Jiyoung Koo argues, some South Koreans remain in Qingdao not because they run successful businesses, but because they have no other options (J. Koo 2013a). Many middle-aged South Korean businesspeople have spent almost one or two decades in Qingdao. They got married and raised their children in Qingdao. They made friends in Qingdao. They know every shop and street in Chengyang, whether they speak good Mandarin or not. However, they feel estranged and “behind (*twittöröjida*)” when they go back to Seoul. One middle-aged South Korean told me how frustrated he was when he got lost while on Seoul’s subway, because things had changed too much since he left South Korea. He did not have many friends to see anymore and, more importantly, was not sure what he could do for a living. He was fortunate that he had bought an apartment when his business was good in the early 2000s and thus did not need to worry about the rapidly increasing rent in Chengyang. Still, selling his apartment in Chengyang would not pay for the resettlement of his family in South Korea, not to mention the higher cost of living and education for his children. Some companies secured financial support for relocation from local governments in South Korea, which were eager to create more jobs in their cities with the help of those returning (C. Kim 2012). Still, most South Koreans cannot expect to receive such support since they run small businesses in the service industry, which is already oversaturated in South Korea.

While the South Korean residents in China have rapidly decreased since 2007, the population of Korean-Chinese has remained almost the same. In 2007, there were about

140,000 Korean-Chinese living in Qingdao (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007, 66). That number increased by 11% in 2011 while the number of South Koreans decreased by 21% (J. Koo 2013a, 273). The number of Korean-Chinese have decreased a bit, so the latest statistics in 2019 show 130,428 Korean-Chinese settled in Qingdao (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2007, 73); a number that has remained largely unchanged since the mid-2000s.

Jiyoung Koo, however, analyzes that there were changes in the patterns of settlement among Korean-Chinese in Qingdao. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, many Korean-Chinese moved from Northeastern China to Qingdao to work for South Koreans as translators, middle-level managers, babysitters, or manual workers. As many South Koreans left Qingdao, Korean-Chinese without higher education or investment capital faced difficulty finding jobs fitting their qualifications. They moved to South Korea where there was still a demand for Korean-Chinese manual labor (J. Koo 2013b). The Korean-Chinese people remaining in Qingdao became less and less dependent on South Koreans. They started their own businesses or bought companies the South Koreans had left behind. They bought apartments in Chengyang, which turned out to be a good investment, while allowing them to obtain Qingdao household registration (*hukou*).

Kang, a Tiantian Food's sales representative in Qingdao, told me after a few bottles of soju: "we Korean-Chinese in fact *drove out* (*mirõnaeda*) South Koreans in Qingdao, taking over their businesses, shops, and factories, and making Chengyang our own." While *driving out* might be inaccurate for describing the changes in the Korean population and ethnic economy in Qingdao, the presence of Korean-Chinese is now more prominent in Chengyang, compared to that of South Koreans. Korean-Chinese businesspeople busily attend social events organized by clubs and associations, including the Qingdao Korean-Chinese Business Association, Korean-Chinese Women's

Association, Korean-Chinese Writers' Club, and the Qingdao Branch of the Overseas Korean Traders' Association. There are luxurious new restaurants opening up in busy streets in Chengyang, run and/or invested in by Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs. They also invest much time and money paying visits to fellow Korean-Chinese businesspeople (and their family)'s weddings, funerals, and birthday parties, seldom eating dinner at home or resting peacefully at night without drinking.

Reimagining "Korea" as Nationalist, Capitalist, and Colonial Project

Describing the historical trajectories of Korean kimchi, Korean-Chinese, and Koreatown in Qingdao, I have paid particular attention to how "Korea" is situated spatially and temporally when describing products, people, and places. Rewriting the history of kimchi, I focus on imaginaries of "Korea" as a historically continuous and culturally independent entity. South Korean historians, anthropologists, and food studies scholars fiercely debate why and how kimchi is a unique Korean dish by projecting their assumptions about what constitutes "Korea." Some focus on finding the oldest records on kimchi, which would prove their claims that kimchi has been a quintessential part of Korean tradition for over a thousand years. Others argue that kimchi is made using unique cooking methods or ingredients that cannot be found in neighboring countries with which there were material and cultural exchanges to influence each other's foodways. Whether they choose long history or cultural uniqueness to substantiate their claims on the authenticity (Koreanness) of kimchi, their nationalistic narratives on Korean kimchi were largely driven by public awareness of the "threats" posed by neighboring countries, especially Japan and China.

These threats were articulated in considerations of kimchi that is commercially manufactured and distributed by Japanese and Chinese firms, comparing that amount with kimchi made in and exported from South Korea. In sum, the historical-nationalist imaginaries of “Korea” based on historical continuity and cultural uniqueness have developed in response to, or in tandem with, the economic-nationalist imaginaries of “Korea” as a market entity, producing and distributing kimchi as a commodity in competition with other (neighboring) nations.

Although historical-nationalist imaginaries are based on “Korea” understood as a historically continuous cultural entity that existed long before the establishment of South Korea in 1948, “Korea” in the economic-nationalist imaginaries of kimchi is strictly limited to South Korea as a national economy. As Hannah Appel argues, the measuring techniques and indices of the economy not only render the flow of commodities, capital, and labor *legible*, but also naturalize the modern nation-state as the unit of the economy (Appel 2017, 298). National economies are also *compelling*, conditioning the desires, fantasies, and anxieties that justify the deferral of the present for the sake of a glorious future (294-5). During the Cold War in South Korea, GDP and other indices of national economic development were mobilized to remind citizens that the confrontation and competition with North Korea did not end with the Korean War, quenching calls for democracy and equality and justifying the military dictatorship for the sake of winning the “war” of economic development. Such indices also functioned as a barometer of unfinished tasks for postcolonial recovery, because how far the South Korean economy fell behind that of Japan was invoked to remind South Koreans of the socioeconomic damage inflicted by the Japanese colonial regime in the early 20th century. Reducing the economic gap was therefore perceived as a national effort to overcome colonial injustice.

The net exports of kimchi, like other national economic indices, mediated the desires, fantasies, and anxieties that facilitated policy changes and shifting market practices regarding the production and consumption of kimchi. Meanwhile, the numbers—and their nationalist interpretations—naturalize the imaginaries in which “Korea” as an ethnic, cultural, and historical community is equated with South Korea, by excluding from the measurement North Korea and other Korean diaspora populations, who make, distribute, and consume kimchi as Koreans. In other words, the trade deficit of “Korean” kimchi, an effective (and *compelling*) articulation of the national economy, conditioned an imaginary expansion of the temporal boundaries of Korea as an historical and cultural community of kimchi makers (and eaters), while failing to embrace Korean kimchi produced, distributed, and consumed outside South Korea.

While the imaginaries of “Korea” *qua* South Korea remain hegemonic in the nationalistic discourses on Korean kimchi—or other nationalistic narratives intertwined with the socioeconomic imaginaries of the national economy—in South Korea, they do not prohibit the efforts of Korean expatriates to embody, reconfigure, and reproduce “Korea” within idiosyncratic market, cultural, ethnic, and (post)national contexts outside of South Korea. Korean-Chinese are an *ethnic* minority group in the People’s Republic of China, but their “Korean” identities have been conditioned by their economic, political, and social connections with North and South Korea which facilitate their postnational membership and mobility. South Koreans move to China either to preserve their economic roles in the global economy or to move forward with new economic opportunities. Relocating or expanding their businesses outside of South Korea, South Koreans actively mobilize Korean ethnic networks to create “Korean”

businesses outside South Korea and to recreate the living environments where they can maintain “Korean” lifestyles and connections with South Korea (“Koreatowns”).

Various forms, appeals, and narratives of “Korea” emerged in businesses and living environments outside South Korea, as is the case of Qingdao. “Koreatowns” emerge, relocate, and disappear as the conditions of transnational mobilities—not just of people but of commodities, capital, and cultures—change. Within the same “Koreatown,” Koreans claim their connections, membership, and rights to “Korea” in various ways. Some South Koreans claim that the authentic Koreanness of their service, products, or businesses, distinguishes theirs from those of *impure* Koreans such as Korean-Chinese. Some Korean-Chinese affirm and actively promote Korean-Chinese styles or qualities, challenging the hegemonic perception of “Korea” *qua* South Korea. Instead, they register versions of “Korea” in which their ethnic, cultural, and regional specificities add value to “Korean” products and businesses. Some even count on North Korean products and aesthetics to be a part of “Korean” businesses and enclaves, promoting versions of “Korea” that are not accessible in South Korea.

The efforts to recreate “Korea” by South Korean expatriates and Korean-Chinese cannot be reduced to an articulation of their ethnic, national, and/or cultural identities. These are first and foremost capitalist endeavors, speculative enterprises aiming to make a profit from their connections and relations to “Korea.” Businesspeople remake, reconfigure, promote, and/or conceal various versions of “Korea,” based on their speculative judgments on whether and how such commercial articulations of “Korea” will add value to their products, services, and businesses. In other words, the imaginaries of “Korea” are situated within the markets where “Korea” has the potential to increase or diminish the value of commodities being produced and circulated.

Various forms of “Korea” are designed and promoted to appeal to potential consumers who desire to enjoy Korean products and services outside South Korea. Naturally, the targeted consumers are Koreans living in ethnic Korean enclaves, who aspire to recreate the living environments they once enjoyed in South Korea or Northeastern China. However, the capitalist markets are simultaneously bounded and unbounded. Capitalist investments in Korean businesses outside South Korea are made not only to make “Korean” money but also make sales to the majority population in the host countries of ethnic enclaves, such as to Han Chinese in a multicultural China. Thus, the capitalist endeavors to produce various forms of Korea are attuned not only to Koreans who (are assumed to) have understanding, experiences, and expectations of Korean cultures and qualities embedded in the products or services, but also to non-Koreans who project their desires and expectations as they choose, consume, and evaluate Korean products and services in the markets.

The capitalist configuration of “Korea” outside South Korea is complicatedly situated within the ethnic Korean enclaves and beyond them. Korean businesses were relocated to Qingdao to preserve their roles as manufacturers of cheaper commodities in the global economy, which they could no longer perform in South Korea. Korean foods, products, and services are made, imported, and circulated in ethnic Korean enclaves like Chengyang, where Korean residents’ desire to enjoy Korean lifestyles facilitates the circulation of capital within ethnically-bounded economic spheres. Korean businesspeople look for opportunities to expand their businesses beyond the ethnic enclaves, “pioneering” the Chinese markets with Korean products. The capitalist expansion is not only aligned with the predominant economic-nationalist narratives in South Korea, which interpret the global circulation of (South) Korean commodities as recognition of cultural superiority and national identity, but also mimics some historic

modes of colonial occupation and expansion. As did Germans and Japanese in the early 20th century in Qingdao, Koreans—especially South Koreans—sought to “pioneer” and “expand” the markets for their industries and markets in China, while creating and maintaining separated social spaces, which materialize as well as reinforce discriminatory assumptions of “fundamental Chinese inferiority and difference” (Steinmetz 2007, 442).

In sum, “Korea” in Korean kimchi mediates the multiple imaginaries of ethnicity, nationality, historicity, and culture, all of which are conditioned by the transborder mobility and connections of Korean populations as well as capitalist expansions mimicking—and repeating—the patterns of colonial expansion in the 20th century. In everyday encounters in which Korean kimchi is made, distributed, and consumed in Chinese markets, the Koreanness of kimchi is barely questioned, challenged, or reflected: it is often treated as a matter of fact in the markets.

However, there are extraordinary processes, events, and situations in which people are forced to reflect on what is Korean about Korean kimchi, to decide on how kimchi can be made, promoted, and distributed as Korean, or to reevaluate whether the Korean quality and aesthetics add value to their kimchi. Such extraordinary moments, which I will present and analyze in the dissertation, draw our attention to the ways in which economic interdependence and political division are coproduced through the commercial, aesthetic, and logistical articulations of Korea, and how such coproduction is situated within a nationalist, capitalist, and colonial reconfiguration of geopolitical and socioeconomic orders in Northeast Asia.

Chapter 2

Boycotting “Korea”: Extraordinary Boycotts and the Ordinary Imaginaries of Bordered Worlds

March 15, 2017: An (Extra)ordinary Day

It was an ordinary day in Tiantian Food. I went to the office, said “*zaoshang hao* (good morning)” to everyone who was already busily at work. I made coffee for the production line manager Choi L., with whom I tasted the production line’s first kimchi of the day and chatted about issues in the manufacturing processes. I greeted the warehouse manager Wang, who was upset and angry after a clash with an office worker. He complained about office workers not understanding the hard work of warehouse workers. So it was definitely an ordinary day in the factory.

I returned to my desk in the office. Among the 15 desks there, mine was closest to the entrance, the kitchen sink, and the window. Senior workers in the company, like the accountant and the financial manager who have worked since the beginning of Tiantian Food in 2006, sat furthest from the entrance, so they would be undisturbed by other office workers and guests coming in and out. But I liked my desk. Not having any

regular work at the office, I made and offered coffee from the kitchen to get involved in conversations, greeted everyone who arrived and departed, and looked out the window to keep up on some of what was happening.

Late in the morning on March 15, 2017, I saw a car enter the factory grounds. Normally, only trailers and company vehicles were allowed to enter the factory. The old white sedan did not look at all familiar to me. It was strange not only to me, but also to most people in the office, who stopped their work and gathered around the window. As the car passed in front of the office window, two people with dark blue uniforms exited the sedan. They did not introduce themselves as they entered into the office; their car and uniforms did that for them. They were investigation officers from the Food and Drug Administration (*shiyaoju*) in Qingdao.

An officer asked who was in charge of the factory. Neither Song nor Choi was at the office, so Xu, the business manager, came out. The officers ordered her to conduct them to the warehouse. Xu did so and introduced them to the warehouse manager, Wang. Entering the warehouse, the officers quickly found the K Food products, and asked Wang to open a box. As Wang followed the request, the officer snatched a package and brought it close to his eyes. It did not take long to learn what they sought. They found a few “problems” regarding the labelling of the K Food kimchi products, about which they had received an “anonymous” report from “a concerned consumer.” The officers explained the problems to Xu, confiscated a box of K Food kimchi products for further examination, and ordered Wang not to ship any K Food products from the warehouse until further notice. Xu was interrogated by the officers regarding the issue for almost an hour, and signed their investigation report.

A raid, or field investigation without notice, was not at all ordinary. In fact, this incident was the first of its kind for Tiantian Food since its establishment in 2006.

Admittedly, Tiantian Food had indeed received numerous consumer comments regarding labelling or food safety issues since it began selling kimchi products in China's domestic markets. None of them led to a field investigation by the local FDA officers. Many consumers who found "problems" with the products directly contacted Tiantian Food, requesting a monetary reward for not reporting to the authorities. Even when consumers made official complaints to the FDA, the bureau recommended an accommodation between the company and the concerned consumers, especially when the issues were minor labelling mistakes rather than genuine food safety problems. The "problems" the FDA had today come to investigate were closer to labelling mistakes, which needed to be fixed, but were nothing that should result in a serious investigation—especially by the officers from the city-level, rather than district-level, administration. Furthermore, since Tiantian Food manufactures kimchi products sold under the brand of renowned South Korean food company K Food, K Food's Beijing branch office should have dealt with consumer complaints before any formal investigation. Thus, the sudden visit from the local FDA officers was not only extraordinary but also did not make sense for those working at Tiantian Food.

The co-owner Choi came into the office partway through the inspection and met the officers, with her "friend" who used to work at the FDA. Choi, a youthful woman in her late forties, oozed charm as she casually chatted with them. Her FDA friend and Choi dropped names of the people they knew in the bureau in an attempt to find any connection among them (and they did). The officers looked relaxed and less grumpy as they left the office and got back into their old white sedan. Seeing them off politely, Choi immediately returned to her desk. She made phone calls to people in K Food, FDA officers she knew, and other "friends" who could help her out. Qingdao's FDA finally released the complaining consumer's contact information. Choi asked the K Food

Beijing branch to negotiate a “deal” with the consumer, which they did. The investigation did not lead to any fines or serious punishment, but the company was directed to revise labelling on the package to meet legal requirements.

With the immediate urgent matters resolved, I asked Choi and other workers in the company how they viewed the sudden investigation. They all agreed that the extraordinary nature of the event could only be explained with “THAAD,” or *sade* (萨德) in Mandarin. By “THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense),” they referred to the strained relationship between South Korea and China due to the implementation of an American defense missile system in South Korea, which had developed into Chinese consumer boycotts of Korean products and new restraints on South Korean businesses by the Chinese government. Choi and other Tiantian Food workers explained to me that without “THAAD,” K Food kimchi products—“Korean” kimchi sold in China under the South Korean brand—would not have been under such scrutiny. The consumer would have contacted the company for monetary reward rather than making an official complaint to the FDA. And the FDA would not have conducted a field investigation without notice for a minor labelling mistake. In other words, my interlocutors at Tiantian Food speculated that both consumers and government officials were taking extraordinary measures in reporting and dealing with the labelling issues due to the political climate, in which South Korean business and products were “sanctioned” by mass mobilization and administrative discretion.

I could not verify their speculative explanation, but the incident indeed happened when the THAAD scandal was occupying everyone’s mind and business planning efforts, especially for people who produced, sold, and consumed “Korean” products in China. Furious Chinese consumers were refusing to buy South Korean appliances or

even enter supermarkets owned by South Korean companies. Some picketed in front of Korean stores and encouraged—or sometimes threatened—Chinese consumers and companies to participate in their boycotts. The Chinese government never levied any economic sanctions against South Korean commodities or companies, but some Korean businesses struggled with inexplicable administrative decisions that had serious impacts upon their Chinese operations. The sudden FDA investigation at the factory, which happened in the early days of the nationwide movement, reminded Tiantian Food employees that their work of making and selling “Korean” kimchi was directly affected by changing political climates. Throughout the year, many sales representatives of Tiantian Food were challenged by drastic decreases in sales, losing longtime clients who did not dare to display “Korean” kimchi in their stores or simply had to close their restaurants. Many plans Tiantian Food had set for the year were put on hold as they focused on surviving the wave.

Describing “THAAD” as Mediated/Mediatized Realities

“THAAD” poses a unique—neither new nor peculiar, yet unresolved—challenge to ethnographic description. It affected people, places, and things in my ethnographic field, such as how the FDA's field investigation was interpreted. Nevertheless, to describe why and how “THAAD” disrupted my interlocutors’ business operation requires an explanation of the transformation and dynamics on a “larger scale,” such as the diplomatic and military tension between China and South Korea. Large-scale events make an impact on people, places, and things, often destabilizing and reconfiguring their modes of operation in unexpected ways, yet they cannot always be observed or experienced. People make sense of—or at least, speculate on—what happens in

“politics,” “economy,” and “the world” by reading, watching, and listening to the news (Anderson 2006). They do not passively understand these large-scale happenings. They react, which sometimes becomes news in itself, such as when Chinese consumers participated in boycotts to show their dissent regarding THAAD implementation in South Korea.

The challenge lies not only in identifying how “large-scale” events are connected to the everyday lives of “people”—for example, how the military and diplomatic tension between the two countries developed into a nationwide boycott, triggering anti-Korean sentiments among the Chinese public and resulting into the closure of many “Korean” businesses. The challenge involves how ethnographers describe the large-scale events without taking their media representation at face value. I am not arguing that the media distort realities; I instead emphasize that people read, listen, discuss, and react to the mediated realities of their societies (Mazzarella 2004), and that mediation is situated, patterned, and overdetermined. So, we cannot discuss how large-scale events in politics and economy affect people’s everyday practices and reactions without discussing how their understanding of “the world” is mediated in particular patterns, or discussing the nature of mediation in mediatized modes of world-making.

The mediation in mediatization of social realities needs to be studied in two related contexts. First, how do vested interests in media production—namely capital and state—shape how events in the world are narrated in the form of news (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002)? How do they affect the ways a series of events, data, and opinions are chosen, arranged, emphasized, refuted, and argued about in the news? Second, how do the media reconfigure their audience’s perception and practices? How does a mediatized representation of the world resonate with people’s experiences and thoughts, reinforcing or transforming their perspectives and practices (Mazzarella

2017)? How do media producers envision the efficacy of their narratives in shaping readers' understanding of current events in the world (Bishara 2012)? In short, how do we analyze mediation not as a deviation from ethnographic realities, but as a crucial aspect of them?

In this chapter, I narrate the stories of "THAAD" by exploring how THAAD implementation and its political and economic consequences were represented in Chinese and South Korean newspapers, and how various people in the kimchi business grappled with and reacted to "THAAD" as a set of mediatized realities. Rather than providing a full description of what happened during this weird time, I focus on showing the patterns and structures of mediation in the media representation of "THAAD." I focus on how the diplomatic and military tension over the implementation of THAAD was represented as a clash between the two nations, and how such media representation conditioned the amplification of nationalist sentiments and the development of boycott movements. Reflecting on how the series of events, statements, and opinions were constructed as the THAAD scandal, I compare the coverage in South Korean and Chinese newspapers, which accused each other of misrepresenting "THAAD." Admittedly, the accusations South Korean and Chinese newspapers leveled at each other were not always grounded in facts and rational reasoning. They cited provocative phrases out of context to sell more papers, raise online advertisement revenues, or advocate the state's political agendas. Nevertheless, by comparing how media coverage of "THAAD" was challenged by the other country's newspapers, I attempt to critically examine—or as Prasenjit Duara suggests, intensively read (Duara 1988, 7)—how "realities" are narrated through partial inclusion and exclusion of facts and selective acceptance of assumptions about how things work in the world. In sum, I

will take the mediatized accusations of misrepresentation not at face value but as an invitation to navigate how realities are mediated / mediatized.

The second half of the chapter focuses on how people in the Chinese kimchi industry perceived and responded to the unfolding of anti-Korean sentiments and nationwide boycotts of “Korean” products. Here also, I do not intend to examine how the political and economic transformation on a large scale affected business operations in the Chinese kimchi industry. Instead, I focus on how kimchi manufacturers and merchants interpreted the implications of “THAAD” in their own business and lives. Their interpretations of and responses to “THAAD,” however accurate or relevant these would be, do not provide a comprehensive description of what happened in the Chinese markets during the boycotts. However, they do provide insights on how kimchi manufacturers and merchants envisioned the prospect of selling “Korean” kimchi in China, expectations which they felt were upended by the anti-Korean sentiments and boycotts. In other words, the stories of “THAAD” told by Chinese kimchi manufacturers and merchants articulate what “Koreanness” is, in what conditions it registers as a valuable quality, and how it is situated in “Chinese” markets, but only by explaining how their speculative interpretations of “Korea” and “China” were seriously questioned and reconsidered.

Incitement through Citations: “THAAD” in Chinese and South Korean Newspapers

In July 2016, the South Korean and United States government announced the implementation of THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea to “ensure the security of [the] ROK [South Korea] and its people, and to protect Alliance military forces from North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile

threats” (United States Forces Korea 2016). Discussion on the implementation of THAAD was officially initiated between South Korea and the United States in February 2016, as North Korea persisted in nuclear weapon development and experiments. Even when THAAD implementation was unofficially brought up by politicians in South Korea and the United States, the Chinese government clearly expressed its opposition to THAAD, showing its concern regarding the asymmetry of military forces in Northeast Asia and the deterioration of the relationship between China and South Korea (H. Pak 2014).

Some Chinese newspapers were highly vocal about THAAD implementation in South Korea. Among them, *Global Times* (*huanqiu Shibao*) drew close attention from South Korean newspapers. The *Global Times* newspaper specializes in international news, and is operated and published by *People’s Daily* (*renmin Ribao*), the newspaper under the supervision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (U. Kwŏn 2017). Because of its connection to *People’s Daily* (and ultimately to the Chinese party-state), many South Korean newspapers introduce *Global Times* as a “state-controlled newspaper” (P. Hong 2016), or a “puppet of the Chinese government” (T. Sin 2016), assuming that *Global Times’* columns and opinions *de facto* represent the Chinese government’s viewpoints on diplomatic matters, often in a candid and straightforward manner. This was why many South Korean newspapers covered *Global Times’* columns on THAAD implementation with such heightened scrutiny. As the official discussion of THAAD began, the *Global Times* published op-eds warning that South Korea would pay the price for THAAD implementation and its sovereignty would be challenged with the deployment of the People’s Liberation Army [PRC army] in Northeast China (S. Nam, 2016). This hostile warning developed into suggestions for sanctions as the South

Korean and United States governments made THAAD implementation official. In the editorial “Opposing THAAD, We Propose the Nation [China] Five Measures,” the *Global Times* editorial board suggested economic sanctions against South Korean companies involved in THAAD implementation (Global Times 2016). The *Global Times* also published columns written by international relations and military experts, who called for economic sanctions and reprisals against South Korean companies (Ŭ. Pak 2016b; C. I 2016). The Chinese government itself published a statement on THAAD implementation in South Korea, showing their concern and dissatisfaction in the matter. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC also summoned South Koreans and the United States ambassadors to deliver the Chinese government’s strong opposition to THAAD implementation (Ŭ. Pak 2016a). In these official measures, economic sanctions were not mentioned or discussed by the Chinese government officials. However, South Korean industries quickly reported unusual restrictions on their business activities in China.

Starting from August 2016, a few concerts and fan meetings of South Korean entertainers in China were suddenly cancelled by their Chinese coordinators. Some TV shows featuring South Korean actors or produced by South Korean productions were abruptly cancelled (Ŭ. Pak & C. Kim 2016). Chinese travel agencies removed package tours to South Korea from their websites, allegedly due to pressure from government authorities (C. Yang & M. Pak 2017). Thus, many South Korean businesses experienced economic sanctions at some level—*hanhallyǒng* (한한령) in Korean or *xianhanling* (限韩令) in Mandarin—although the Chinese government did not acknowledge any official sanctions against South Koreans (Ding 2016). In this context, *Global Times* op-eds and columns justified the speculation that the Chinese government had unofficially imposed

economic sanctions against South Korean businesses to pressure the South Korean government to rescind their decision on THAAD. South Korean newspapers interpreted the *Global Times* columns as “what China [the Chinese government] really wanted to express but could not in an official manner,” citing the paper as evidence in their speculations on economic sanctions (O. Kim & H. Ch’oe 2016).

On the other hand, Chinese newspapers criticized South Korean newspapers’ reports on economic sanctions, quoting provocative phrases from South Korean news articles. Drawing upon the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson’s answer in a press conference which I will explain in detail (Ding 2016), Chinese newspapers denied the existence of *xianhanling*, economic sanctions against South Korea. They pointed out that the anecdotal “evidence” of economic sanctions was related to factors other than THAAD, criticizing the South Korean newspapers for making up stories about economic sanctions based on inaccurate rumors and irrelevant cases (Fan and Ji 2016; Jin 2017; Zhang and Jin 2016; Zhao 2016).

However, the Chinese newspapers’ coverage did not end with debunking South Korean reports. The Chinese newspapers described in detail how much South Koreans were concerned with the potential economic impact of *xianhanling*. For example, they recounted how much South Korean entertainment and cosmetics industries relied on sales in China, which could not be compensated by sales in Southeast Asia’s smaller markets. They pointed out that South Korean entertainment and cosmetic companies’ stocks had plunged with the rumors of *xianhanling*. These Chinese newspapers claimed that while these rumors were fictitious, they nevertheless exemplified the South Koreans’ heavy reliance on Chinese markets (Fan and Ji 2016; Zhang and Jin 2016; Zhao 2016).

It is noteworthy that both the South Korean and Chinese news articles I discuss here were published before the implementation of THAAD, which happened later in 2017. The governmental statements and media coverage mentioned above focused on the official announcement of an upcoming THAAD implementation. They all discussed how the implementation of THAAD could potentially be connected to other events, justifying their speculations on the political and economic consequences of THAAD implementation. The South Korean government justified its decision based on the nuclear missile threat from North Korea. The Chinese government opposed the South Korean government's decision, arguing that THAAD would be ineffective in nullifying North Korean nuclear or ballistic attacks: instead, it would only enhance the United States Army's capacity to supervise military actions in China. The South Korean newspapers delivered opposing views on the necessity of THAAD implementation, but unanimously expressed their concern about China's economic retaliation over the decision to implement THAAD. Some Chinese newspapers—notably, *Global Times*—expressed radical opinions that requested economic sanctions against South Korean corporations, which could force the South Korean government to reconsider their decision via consideration of their heavy reliance on economic exchange with China.

All of these conflicting views were based on partial truths. North Korean nuclear missiles did threaten the security of South Korea. THAAD included a highly effective monitoring system, which could have provided the United States Army with crucial information on military activities in China when implemented in South Korea. In previous years, South Korean industries had indeed experienced a series of unofficial economic sanctions imposed by the Chinese government, which seriously affected the companies who relied on sales in Chinese markets. The views promoted by the

governments and newspapers differed on what was deemed important for evaluating the military, political, and economic implications of THAAD implementation.

Comparing these views on THAAD implementation, both South Korean and Chinese newspapers illuminated the series of events as a clash between two nations. The South Korean newspapers depicted “China” as an authoritarian bully that mobilized newspapers and the private sector to threaten South Korean businesses. The Chinese newspapers portrayed “South Korea” as a small and powerless country that succumbed to political pressure from the United States and would now be potentially trapped in economic tension with “China.” As the newspapers presented clashing views on THAAD implementation, the military, political, and other tensions surrounding the issue were broadly defined as the confrontation between the two nations—“South Korea” and “China”—over “THAAD”—the implementation of the missile defense system as well as the political and economic measures related to it.

Boycotts: The Boundary between the Nation and its People

THAAD was ultimately implemented in South Korea in 2017, almost a year after the official announcement. During the process, South Koreans went through unprecedented political events and a regime transition, which complicated the perception of “THAAD” both in South Korea and China. Soon after the official announcement of THAAD implementation, the South Korean President Geun-hye Park was accused of bribery, corruption, and abuse of presidential power (S. Choe 2018). Soon she faced millions of South Koreans participating in mass demonstrations and calling for her immediate resignation. In December 2016, she was impeached by the South Korean National Assembly, which was admitted by the Constitutional Court in March 2017 (S. Choe

2017a). President Park left office when she was impeached by the National Assembly, and her appointee, Prime Minister Kyo-ahn Hwang, took her position until the new President Jae-in Moon was elected in May 2017 (S. Choe 2017b).

In the context of South Korean politics, THAAD implementation was deemed a strong confrontational measure against North Korea that would also strengthen South Korea's alliance with the United States, both of which appealed to Park's political base. However, as Park was about to leave office, whether the next South Korean President would revoke the decision came under debate. THAAD implementation was unpopular among left-leaning liberals in South Korea, who generally supported more conciliatory policies on North Korean matters and less reliance on U.S. Military power. Many liberals in South Korea expected the THAAD implementation process would be put on hold until the next President was elected, and a President from the liberal political party would then revoke or revisit the decision. Their optimistic expectation was shared by some Chinese newspapers. These Chinese newspapers (inaccurately) related Park's impeachment to her "mismanagement" of THAAD implementation, which they demanded be overturned by the new South Korean administration (T. Sin 2016; C. Yang 2017).

However, acting President Hwang¹ did not halt the implementation procedure. Under his administration, the South Korean government concluded negotiations with one of the largest South Korean conglomerates, Lotte, which ceded their land for the THAAD base in February 2017 (Ŭ. Kim 2017). In March 2017, the US army transported

¹ In the South Korean administration, the position of Prime Minister (*kungmuch'ongni*) is very much like that of the Vice President in the United States, except for being appointed by the President with the possibility of replacement during the President's term. Hwang served the Park administration as Attorney General and was later appointed Prime Minister. He became acting President when Park's impeachment was approved in the National Assembly.

parts of THAAD missiles into South Korea without notifying neighboring countries or even residents in the affected area, which was interpreted as the acting President's effort to make THAAD implementation irreversible (Ŭ. Pak 2017b). The opposition party showed their dissatisfaction with the acting President's handling of THAAD implementation, but their presidential candidate Jae-in Moon, who was elected in May 2017—did not promise the withdrawal of THAAD.²

Since it seemed that THAAD implementation was inevitable and irreversible even after Park was ousted from office, dissent toward South Korea reemerged among the Chinese. Lotte, a South Korean company which provided its land for THAAD, became the primary target for Chinese critics. As one of the biggest manufacturers of snacks and drinks in South Korea, with a strong presence in retail industry as well, Lotte had established factories and local offices in China as early as 1994 (C. Chŏng 2017). Lotte had successfully launched its products in Chinese markets, and its supermarket chains played important roles in distributing Lotte-branded snacks and drinks. Lotte was also well known among Chinese tourists to South Korea for its department stores and duty-free shops. Nevertheless, with Lotte accused of being complicit in THAAD implementation, it suddenly became the most hated South Korean company in China. Chinese newspapers criticized Lotte's decision to yield its land for THAAD, and urged them to "leave China once and for all" (O. Kim 2017). Multiple Chinese governmental authorities investigated Lotte companies in China for fire and hygiene safety as well as for potential tax fraud, which many South Korean newspapers conjectured was

² As a prominent presidential candidate, Moon maintained deliberate ambiguity on THAAD implementation—not only to avoid stimulating the United States and China over the highly controversial issue, but also to appeal to conservative voters who were troubled by Park's scandal but did not support pro-China and North Korea policies.

unofficial retaliation against Lotte over their role in THAAD implementation (H. Kim 2016).

The most significant impact on Lotte, however, was consumer boycotts of their stores and products. A few civil organizations in China and South Korea coordinated boycotts of Lotte in both countries to express their opposition to THAAD implementation (S. Hong 2017). In social media, many Chinese urged or showed their commitment to the Lotte boycotts, demonstrating their support for the Chinese government in opposing the implementation of THAAD in South Korea (Ů. Pak 2017a). In their columns and editorials, Chinese newspapers—especially *Global Times*—urged Chinese to participate in the Lotte boycott, posted online polls in which the majority of Chinese netizens supported the boycott, and reported grassroots consumer movements both online and offline (Ů. Pak 2017a).

By March 2017, when the FDA officials raided Tiantian Food in response to a consumer report, it was obvious that the boycotts were a nationwide phenomenon in China. Chinese consumers refused to shop at Lotte supermarkets and buy Lotte products. Some proactively expressed their commitment to the boycott by holding large banners or pickets in front of Lotte supermarkets. Their presence discouraged other Chinese consumers from even entering the stores. Either voluntarily or under pressure from consumers, many Chinese companies discontinued their partnership with Lotte. Some stopped distributing their products to Lotte supermarkets. Some online shopping malls ousted Lotte and refused to sell Lotte-brand products on their platforms. The boycotts made an impact beyond Lotte stores and products. Sales of South Korean automobiles, such as Kia and Hyundai, were cut in half in March 2017 (H. Song & C. I 2017). Many commercial streets in Seoul looked empty with the drastic decrease in Chinese tourists (Korea Tourism Statistics 2017). Even though the boycott specifically

targeted Lotte for its role in THAAD implementation, it also targeted loosely-defined “Korean” companies and products throughout its development, as a way to show Chinese consumers’ dissent toward “South Korea” for its decision on THAAD.

It is noteworthy that consumer boycotts developed as the Chinese government allegedly imposed unofficial sanctions against South Korean businesses. Thus, the South Korean newspapers did not clearly distinguish consumer boycotts from economic sanctions imposed by the Chinese government. Instead, they defined “China’s” response to THAAD as *hanhallyǒng*, broadly referring to the Chinese government’s measurements against South Korean businesses, along with their direct roles in unofficial economic sanctions as well as the indirect mobilization of newspapers, private companies, and consumers.

The Chinese government categorically denied the existence of *hanhallyǒng* (*xianhanling*), reassuring the citizens that they had neither imposed any sanctions against South Korean businesses nor played any role in mobilizing consumer boycotts of Korean stores and products (Ding 2016). In a press conference, the spokesperson of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs carefully separated the Chinese government’s position from that of its people. In his answer to a journalist’s question about *hanhallyǒng* (*xianhanling*), he said:

“First, I have not heard of the so-called *xianhanling*. Second, the Chinese government has always supported civilian and cultural exchanges between the two countries. However, I believe you can all understand that such exchanges between the two countries should be based on public support (民意, *minyì*). Third, it is well known that the Chinese government has expressed its opposition to the United States’ implementation of THAAD in South Korea. The Chinese people have voiced their dissatisfaction over the matter, so relevant parties must have taken note of their sentiments.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016)

In this answer, the Ministry spokesperson not only denied the existence of *xianhanling* but also refuted the ways “China” was viewed by South Korean newspapers. He carefully distinguished the Chinese government’s stance on economic (“civilian and cultural”) matters from its position on military tension (THAAD), and carefully separated the government’s stance from its people’s views and sentiments. By separating the realm of the government regarding military matters from the realm of civilian exchanges affected by public opinions and sentiments, the spokesperson refuted the hidden assumption of *xianhanling* that the Chinese government had mobilized, encouraged, or connived Chinese consumers’ boycotts.³

Nevertheless, South Korean newspapers interpreted the answer as an official recognition of the boycott. By admitting that Chinese consumers boycotted South Korean products and that their behaviors were based on their opinions concerning THAAD implementation, the Ministry spokesperson, according to South Korean media, recognized the boycott as a reasonable market response and a legitimate way to express political opinions. Thus, the answer was deemed as more evidence that the Chinese government encouraged the boycott of South Korean products, rather than a refutation of economic sanctions or the way the state-society relationship in China was understood.

On the one hand, *hanhallyǒng* in South Korean newspapers referred to boycotts of South Korean products and stores as well as unofficial economic sanctions, assuming

³ The literal meaning of *xianhanling* is “an order that restrains South Korea,” assuming that the Chinese government imposed sanctions against South Korean businesses. As the dispute over THAAD implementation developed into a nationwide boycott of South Korean products and stores in China, the South Korean media claimed that the boycott was also a part of *xianhanling* (*hanhallyǒng*), mobilized and encouraged by the state-owned Chinese media and connived by the Chinese government.

that both were mobilized and encouraged by the Chinese government. On the other hand, *xianhanling* always appeared in Chinese newspapers and official statements with scare quotes, challenging “unfounded” claims fabricated by the South Korean media. The conflicting views on the political and economic consequences of THAAD implementation make it challenging to assess when the “THAAD scandal” was ultimately toned down. Since the Chinese government did not officially recognize any sanctions imposed on South Korean businesses, South Korean media and industry were keenly attentive to changes in the private sector that would signify the lifting of *hanhallyǒng*. A Chinese fashion magazine cover featuring a South Korean singer (The Segye Times 2018), a Chinese film festival inviting South Korean films (M. Ha 2018), or a Chinese politician’s visit to a South Korean company in China (S. Hong 2019) fueled optimistic speculation over the lifting of *hanhallyǒng*. Some newspapers—often the same newspapers but at different times—raised more pessimistic speculation over *hanhallyǒng*, based on the fact that no South Korean games and films had gotten approved for distribution in China since the THAAD dispute (W. Son 2020).⁴ Those who searched for more definite signs of a “turnaround” focused on diplomatic gestures, especially summit talks. However, President Moon’s visit to China in December 2017 did not result in any statement on THAAD or *hanhallyǒng* (P. Mun 2017). President Jinping Xi’s visit to South Korea, planned for 2020, was highly expected to “end” *hanhallyǒng* once and for all (H. Chǒng 2019), but was indefinitely delayed due to the global pandemic.

⁴ A South Korean game finally got approved for distribution in China in December 2020, but it was the first one since March 2017. South Korean movies and dramas have not been approved for official distribution in China since 2017, although it has been constantly speculated that the sanction would be lifted in the near future.

Without any clear end, not to mention any consensus on whether or not any opposing actions existed, *hanhallyǒng/xianhanling* still lingers in the media coverage of Sino-Korean relationships, at least in South Korean newspapers. Admittedly, Chinese newspapers including *Global Times* have not published any editorials or columns criticizing THAAD implementation or demanding economic sanctions against South Korean businesses since October 2017. Accordingly, South Korean newspapers have stopped following Chinese newspapers' coverage of the THAAD scandal. Instead, they have focused on when and how *hanhallyǒng* would end and economic exchanges between the two countries—more correctly, the business of South Korean companies in China—would return to pre-THAAD status. South Korean newspapers kept speculating over the lifting of *hanhallyǒng* whenever a South Korean movie star appeared in Chinese commercials or Chinese travel agencies promoted South Korea tour packages. While such news temporarily boosted the stock price of related industries, the restrictions that South Korean entertainment, tourism, and gaming industries faced still persist since the THAAD dispute, except for a very few cases drawing optimistic speculation.

For South Koreans, especially South Korean newspapers that reported upon THAAD implementation and its subsequent political and economic consequences, THAAD disputes challenged them to reflect on what “China” is and how it should be viewed. How can the unique relationships among the government, media, private sector, and people in China be understood? What are the potential benefits and risks of business in China, which has an enormous manufacturing capacity as well as the world's largest retail markets? How can understandings of China as a political entity and as an economic entity be reconciled, especially when they could not be conveniently separated, as in the THAAD scandal?

The THAAD dispute also pushed Chinese to reflect on what “South Korea” is for them. What constitutes the “South Korea” to which they showed their opposition regarding THAAD implementation, and which their boycotts articulated as a target? Admittedly, there was no consensus on the boundary or target of the boycotts, and, in many cases, consumers did not always consider these boundaries when participating in boycotts. Nevertheless, it was a critical issue for those who produced and distributed Korean commodities in China, whether or not their businesses and products were perceived as Korean and thus targets. They attempted to understand how and why the boundary of “Korea” was drawn in a particular way during the boycotts, configuring their responses to the unusual challenge.

Reaching both “Korean” and “Chinese” Kimchi Markets

Tiantian Food was a manufacturer, and therefore slower to comprehend the changes in consumer markets. Sales representatives in major cities, however, quickly detected and reported problems to their company in Qingdao. A few days before the FDA raid, the representative in Dalian, Seong, called the office. Seong asked if sales representatives in other cities reported any problems regarding the boycott, saying that kimchi sales in Dalian had recently plunged as people participated in the boycott of Korean products and stores. Choi, upon later learning about Seong’s report, simply dismissed it since she did not perceive any decrease in orders from other representatives. Soon after the raid, however, people at Tiantian Food realized that “THAAD” would definitely affect their company’s business. Also, as Seong accurately guessed, other sales representatives reached out and shared “THAAD” experiences in their regions.

Kang, the sales representative in Qingdao, rushed to the factory in person to report the problems he observed. Although Kang did not see many changes in orders from his clients in Chengyang District, where most South Koreans and Korean-Chinese in Qingdao live, his downtown clients reduced their kimchi orders. When Kang visited a downtown Korean supermarket, he did not see many customers not to mention anyone who had bought Tiantian Food's kimchi. Kang was concerned that many downtown Korean stores would soon be closed if the boycott persisted, which would mean that he would lose important clients.

The different responses to the THAAD dispute between Chengyang and downtown stores could be explained with the difference in target customers. In Qingdao, a major Chinese city with a population of 9 million, its downtown is located near the seashore, while most South Koreans and Korean-Chinese live in the Chengyang District where the airport is located.⁵ Thus, among Kang's clients, Korean restaurants and stores in Chengyang mostly served ethnic Korean (South Korean and Korean-Chinese) consumers, while Korean stores and restaurants in the downtown area—fewer but larger in scale—mostly served Han Chinese (non-Korean heritage) consumers. Ethnic Korean consumers, according to Kang's analysis, would have been less swayed by the THAAD dispute or the call for boycotts. Regardless of whether they agreed with THAAD implementation or were sympathetic with the cause of anti-Korean sentiments,

⁵ Until the mid-2000s, many South Koreans and Korean-Chinese lived in the downtown area, creating a little "Koreatown" in the middle of the Qingdao city center. However, as Chengyang District, which used to be rural villages, was quickly developed into an urban residential and commercial center, many ethnic Koreans moved to Chengyang in search of cheaper and newer apartments as well as the convenience of being close to the international airport. Now very few Korean residents live in the former "Koreatown" in the city center, while Chengyang District is has become known for Korean stores, restaurants, and apartments with a large number of Korean residents (See Chapter 1 for more details).

Korean food, including kimchi, was an indispensable part of their lives. In contrast, for non-Korean heritage consumers in China, Korean food was chosen to add variety to their daily diet, and could thus be easily replaced with other exotic, foreign, and new foods.

Other sales representatives presented a similar analysis to Kang's as they shared their experiences with the company. They saw the clear contrast between the Han Chinese-oriented shops that were suffering from anti-Korean sentiments and ethnic Korean-oriented shops that were less affected by the scandal. In Shanghai, customers did not even dare to go into Korean restaurants, worrying about being criticized or perhaps even beaten by those who had called for the boycott. In Xi'an, department stores removed the stands where kimchi and other side dishes were sold, afraid of becoming a target of the boycott if they kept selling "Korean" products. Sales representatives in Beijing, Guangzhou, and Dalian all reported a concerning decrease in sales as the boycott became a nationwide phenomenon and their clients struggled to even open their doors. Representatives in those big cities, although the situation differed by degree, relied on clients whose customers were largely Han-Chinese and were thus adversely affected by the boycott. In contrast, sales representatives in Yanji and Shenyang, northeastern cities where Korean-Chinese communities have been established for decades, were less affected by the boycott. Yanji representatives explained that even Han Chinese in Yanji ate kimchi in their meals every day and, more importantly, were less sympathetic with the confrontational rhetoric of the boycott that targeted their Korean-Chinese neighbors and friends.

The distinction based on the ethnicity of target consumers—between "Korean" markets and "Chinese" markets, in their words—was not at all new. Actually, it was a very important distinction, foundational to the kimchi business in China. When

Tiantian Food decided to focus on domestic markets—an unusual business strategy for a Chinese kimchi manufacturer at that time—they expected a reliable demand from ethnic Korean communities in China. About two million Korean-Chinese and 300,000 South Korean expatriates comprise the ethnic Korean communities in major Chinese cities, where many Korean supermarkets and restaurants sell or serve kimchi for Korean customers. Kimchi, to which these Koreans have nostalgic attachments, is consumed daily by them and used in multiple dishes they cook and eat. Nevertheless, Tiantian Food would not make a transition to domestic sales if they only targeted the Korean markets in China, which are far smaller than South Korean markets. Tiantian Food owners expected kimchi would be welcomed in “Chinese” markets, where a large number of consumers are eagerly in search of healthy and exotic food products to purchase with their rapidly increased consumer power.

Whenever asked about the appeal of Korean kimchi in Chinese markets, Song and Choi brought up the example of Jang’s business in Xi’an. Jang, a young Korean-Chinese businesswoman, was Tiantian Food’s first domestic partner. Jang started a small kimchi factory in Xi’an, but soon decided to focus on selling rather than making kimchi, approaching Tiantian Food as a potential supplier. Song and Choi were not so confident of Jang’s business plan. At that time, Xi’an had very few ethnic Koreans, and it would be too expensive and risky to transport fresh kimchi from Qingdao to Xi’an. Jang’s solution was counter-intuitive: she wanted kimchi made of lower quality ingredients, and asked that it be transported with regular trucks instead of refrigerated ones. In this way, Jang could not only save money but also ferment the kimchi during its transport. Instead of accommodating the taste of Chinese consumers, who were assumed to prefer less fermented “fresh” kimchi, Jang encouraged her customers to get used to well-

fermented and sour “authentic” Korean kimchi⁶. Her efforts to infiltrate Xi’an food markets with sour Korean kimchi were well rewarded. Her company successfully expanded its sales network in Xi’an, distributing kimchi and other Korean food products to large supermarkets and department stores in the region. In many ways, Jang’s success in “Chinese” markets inspired Tiantian Food to make the transition to domestic sales.

However, Jang was the sales representative whose business was most severely affected by the boycott. Jang sold kimchi and other Korean products through large supermarkets and department stores in Xi’an, “renting” a few stands in the stores and dispatching her employees to promote and sell the products. As the boycott started, however, those stores were put under great pressure by angry consumers to remove “Korean” products. The consumers not only refused to buy any “Korean” products but also threatened to boycott stores that did not take down the “Korean” stands. Some stores officially announced their decision to remove South Korean brand products and were applauded by those who supported the boycott. In this hostile atmosphere, most of Jang’s longtime clients announced that they could not continue displaying Jang’s Korean food products, and that her employees were not welcomed to promote and sell the products. Jang hoped that the boycott would be quickly subdued so that she could send her employees and products back to the stores. Her wish was not totally unrealistic given that another boycott of Japanese products a few years previous, which was triggered by a territorial dispute between China and Japan, did not last very long. Nevertheless, since the stores did not change their stance on Korean products for a

⁶ While kimchi tastes better when made with better ingredients, its taste is less dependent upon the quality of raw ingredients when kimchi is fully fermented. Thus, Jang could convincingly ask Tiantian Food to use lower quality ingredients, knowing that her kimchi would be fully fermented by the time it arrived in Xi’an.

couple of months, Jang finally gave up, letting her employees who worked at the stores go.

The boycott of Korean products finally weakened, but Jang did not return to the previous business strategy. She was not sure if kimchi and other Korean products would sell in Chinese supermarkets as they used to. In addition, since Samsung, one of the largest South Korean conglomerates, established its semiconductor factories in Xi'an in 2014, many South Koreans and Korean-Chinese settled down in Xi'an and created an ethnic Korean enclave. So, there was now a "Korean" market in Xi'an that had not existed when she first started her business in the late 2000s. Since the boycott upended her Chinese market business, Jang focused more on selling kimchi to Korean restaurants near the apartments where many South Korean Samsung employees lived, and supplying kimchi to cafeterias in the factories. The transition was neither planned nor satisfactory, considering the over-competition for these small Korean markets which could not be expected to grow too much. But Jang was trying to do what she could after losing quite a lot of money and experienced employees to "THAAD."

Jang's case was somewhat exceptional when compared to those of other sales representatives. Most sales representatives did not choose between "Korean" markets and "Chinese" markets but pursued both, as Kang did in Qingdao. They relied on the constant demand from Korean markets while looking for expansions in Chinese markets such as large, not ethnically-bounded, supermarkets. Sales representatives complained about how saturated their Korean markets were with competitors who were willing to lower prices to steal clients. There were a limited number of Korean restaurants and supermarkets counting mostly on ethnic Korean consumers, whose numbers would not increase much—although that population could decrease rapidly during a depression or financial crisis. This was why Chinese markets

were viewed as solutions for the over-competition in Korean markets. However, selling kimchi in large supermarkets had its own problems. Famous and national franchise supermarkets demanded a very high “slotting fee” (*ruchangfei*) as well as promotional and stocking fees from suppliers, a significant barrier for sales representatives with little capital. The supermarkets also enforced higher quality control standards, only admitting kimchi with the latest manufacturing dates and returning products that were past the somewhat arbitrary expiration dates set by the stores themselves. Large supermarkets provided access to a great number of Chinese consumers, but that access came with huge investment costs and significant risks.

While a few representatives were still invested in getting access to Chinese consumers shopping at large supermarkets, Tiantian Food attempted to secure reliable and less risky channels to reach “Chinese” markets. First, they established a partnership with a South Korean food company, K Food. K Food sold a variety of food products, including kimchi, through national franchise supermarkets in China. By manufacturing kimchi under the K Food brand, which sold at a great scale through large supermarkets, Tiantian Food brought in profits from Chinese markets without the huge investment required for access or the usual risks related to doing business with large supermarkets.

Second, Tiantian Food launched online sales in order to reach Chinese consumers who increasingly relied on virtual modes of shopping and other customers who lived in areas sales representatives could not cover. For online sales, Tiantian Food brought out new kimchi products in smaller packages, invested in product photography and online promotions (See Chapter 3), and hired an online sales consulting agency to manage webpages and day-to-day operations. Of course, online sales also required significant investment. Major Chinese online shopping malls such as *JD* and *Tianmao* all charge a “slotting fee” to set up an online company store on their platforms. A certain percent of

online revenues is shared with the consulting agency, and a few employees in the office, warehouse, and production lines need to be deployed for work related to online sales. However, online sales provide modes of access to Chinese markets that sales representatives or even large supermarkets cannot, and with less investment than what would be needed for sales through national franchise supermarkets.

Thus, for sales representatives and Tiantian Food, both in offline and online sales, there was a clear distinction between Korean and Chinese markets. It is also noteworthy that the same distinction has been applied when comparing the South Korean markets to which Tiantian Food's kimchi products had been exported and the domestic Chinese markets where they aspired to navigate. In these comparisons, Korean markets were always described as being more established because consumers understood kimchi and consumed it regularly, even though the markets were small and overcrowded with competitors. Chinese markets were always viewed as emerging and came with considerable risks as well as great potential, given their scale and rapid growth.

Kimchi manufacturers and merchants might have different views on the merits, risks, and potentials of their business; and Korean and Chinese markets do not always refer to the same consumer groups. Nonetheless, those in the kimchi industry in China, or Korean product businesses in general, share the understanding that there is a border within their markets. The border is neither a legal nor a territorial one, which would require crossing complicated customs clearing procedures, but still demands differentiated approaches and efforts to reach the consumers with particular ethnic, cultural, and national dispositions. For years, sales representatives and owners of Tiantian Food skillfully mastered moves across the border between what they called Korean and Chinese markets, keeping their base in small yet reliable Korean markets while expanding their reach to Chinese markets through varied channels and methods.

The boycott triggered by the controversy over THAAD implementation made it harder for people and commodities to travel between South Korea and China, although people might disagree on what caused the problem. It also posed challenges to entrepreneurs in China, whose business relied on the appeal of their Korean products to Chinese consumers, as well as their capacity to reach both Korean and Chinese markets in China. The boycott radically upended the ways in which Korean products were perceived in Chinese consumer markets, thus forcing Korean businesspeople to reconsider strategies for moving across the border within markets.

Redefining the Identity of Kimchi

There seemed not much Tiantian Food could do about the boycott. From the beginning, many people in the office hoped that anti-Korean sentiment would be short-lived, and they could go back to business as usual. Unfortunately for Tiantian Food, the boycott persisted long enough to make a major impact in the business. The amount of kimchi ordered by sales representatives—especially those who relied more on sales in “Chinese” markets—significantly decreased as they struggled to maintain their business. Their important partner, K Food, suffered a great decrease in sales, since they mostly relied on sales in large Chinese supermarkets where Korean products were now ignored by Chinese consumers even if they were not removed by the stores. Tiantian Food put much hope in online sales when they hired an online sales consulting agency, created new product photography, and prepared to launch new products exclusively for online sales. However, their online business plans required serious readjustment with the impact of the boycott.

The first action Tiantian Food took, following advice from an online sales consulting agency, was to remove advertising slogans that mentioned “South Korea (*hanguo*)” from their online sales pages. Phrases like “authentic (South) Korean-style kimchi” and “the quality well recognized by South Korean consumers” were quickly taken down. They were replaced with slogans emphasizing the owners’ roots in Northeastern China (*dongbei*) and their Korean-Chinese (*chaoxianzu*) identity. Instead of promoting the company’s earlier success in export to South Korea, online pages showed pictures of their kimchi in Japanese supermarkets. While Tiantian Food’s Kimchi was still presented as an authentic cultural product of superior quality well-perceived by foreigners, now its authenticity—Koreanness—was based on the company owners’ attachment to their ethnic tradition and culture (*chaoxianzu*), which was emphasized to be the Northeastern part of “China” (*dongbei*).

Also, as Tiantian Food launched a series of new kimchi products for online sales, Choi decided to remove Korean product names from the packages. The “new” products were the same kinds of kimchi but with new packages, the details of which were oriented to appeal to Chinese online consumers. The new packages contained a smaller amount of kimchi than previously. The most popular product ordered by sales representatives contained about 2 pounds of kimchi. Kimchi products in smaller amounts had already been getting more popular in recent years, appealing to consumers who lived alone or with small families, but even those contained about 1 pound of kimchi. The packages of new products were much smaller than the existing ones, ranging from 5oz to 1oz. Those new products targeted Chinese online consumers who wanted to try kimchi for the first time but did not want to commit to a large package, or to those who ate kimchi once in a while rather than keeping it in the refrigerator for regular consumption. The new package designs were intended to better

appeal to young middle-class Chinese. Choi requested that the new packages be simple and modern, asking me (as a designer) to imitate the color composition of her Korean cosmetic bottle design. New product photographs of kimchi were created representing the modern, urban, and foreign aesthetics of “Korean” foods (see Chapter 3), and were added on the white background of the packages.

Even though the photos and overall package designs remained unchanged, the ongoing anti-Korean sentiments and boycotts forced Choi to reconsider the convention of adding Korean product names on packages. As I elaborate in Chapter 3, product names in Korean not only help Korean-speaking customers to easily identify the types of kimchi but also contribute to creating the imagery of authentic Korean kimchi for potential Chinese consumers. New products mostly targeted Chinese consumers with little familiarity with kimchi or Korean food in general, so adding Korean product names would have been for aesthetic rather than informative reasons. With the boycotts, it would likely negatively affect sales to associate the products with Korean culture or origin, which the Korean product names were expected to do. Still, it was not an easy decision for Choi since Tiantian Food’s kimchi products always included product names in Korean. She ultimately decided to drop them, saying that these products were exclusively for online Chinese consumers, who not only could not read Korean but also did not welcome anything related to South Korea.

Switching to a national from an ethnic identity and toning down their Korean character might seem convenient choices for Korean-Chinese businesses like Tiantian Food. However, regardless of whether such strategies worked and helped the company overcome the boycotts, being forced to choose one side over the other posed unique challenges and dilemmas to Korean-Chinese businesses like Tiantian Food. Korean-Chinese businesspeople like Song and Choi did not choose to go to South Korea when

many Korean-Chinese did for lucrative economic opportunities.⁷ Instead, they pursued careers in China, in which their linguistic, cultural, and social familiarity with both “China” and “Korea” is appreciated, such as in the kimchi business for domestic Chinese markets. Over the years, Tiantian Food aspired to be successful in *both* Chinese *and* Korean markets, supplying the “authentic” kimchi ethnic Korean consumers wanted as well as the “exotic” healthy food Chinese consumers might want to add to their diet. Focusing exclusively on Korean kimchi markets would betray the rationale of selling kimchi in China and limit their future growth as a business. Nevertheless, it would have been premature to concentrate on the Chinese kimchi markets at the expense of their market base in ethnic Korean communities. Emphasizing their ethnic “Chinese” Korean (*chaoxianzu*) identity and removing Korean product names were compromises Tiantian Food made reluctantly, in order to avoid losing their appeal to Chinese markets while hoping they could reverse the changes when the boycotts subsided.

Multiple Imaginaries of Bordered Worlds

In his article “Patriotism and Its Futures,” Arjun Appadurai (1993) discusses various aspirations, identities, and social formations that cannot be explained within the frame of territorial nationalism. He argues that the belonging to nations that people feel,

⁷ In the late 1990s and especially the early 2000s, many Korean-Chinese went to South Korea for blue-collar jobs. What they earned in South Korea, even in lower-level manual work or service industry jobs, was far higher than their expected income in China, especially in their hometowns in underdeveloped Northeastern China. Many Korean-Chinese either “recovered” their South Korean nationality or paid high brokerage fees to go to South Korea and work for a few years, expecting to save enough money for their family in China. See Chapter 1 and J. Kwon (2018) for more details.

aspire, and imagine is not coherently reduced to their yearning for territorially-bounded nation-states, because the formations of solidarity and allegiance “are organized around principles of finance, recruitment, coordination, communication, and reproduction that are fundamentally postnational and not just multinational or international.” (420) Appadurai even predicts the future of patriotism: as nation-states “face intractable difficulties in the task of producing people” (428), patriotism will not end but instead become oriented to transnational social formations, and ultimately become “plural, serial, contextual, and mobile” (428).

The yearning of Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs in the Chinese kimchi industry is postnational. They aspire to maintain and benefit from being Korean while staying in China and reaching the Chinese markets. They desire to be “Korean” and “Chinese,” as well as to reach both “Korean” and “Chinese” markets. Their postnational yearning is not—and should not be perceived as—new or opportunistic in emergent capitalist markets. When Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial regime, many Koreans (later categorized as *chaoxianzu*, Korean-Chinese) remained in Northeast China but requested dual citizenship and an autonomous province as ways to maintain their allegiance to Korea and their Korean identity. Many Korean-Chinese have gone back to South Korea and recovered their Korean nationality since the 1990s, but many still choose to work and live between the two countries, moving between South Korea and China for economic opportunities (J. Kwon 2018; 2015). Most of the Korean-Chinese businesspeople working for and with Tiantian Food settle in ethnic Korean enclaves in major Chinese cities, where the people, businesses, and capital from South Korea provide them with new economic opportunities and, more importantly, opportunities to be both Korean and Chinese (See Chapter 1).

Their postnational aspiration to be both Korean and Chinese is not—and should not be confused with—universalistic orientations that overcome nationalist particularism. In other words, they do not want the borders to be blurred and abolished. Instead, they thrive between and across the borders. Their capitalist endeavors, such as kimchi businesses in China, are conditioned by the territorial, cultural, and/or ethnic borders that render the flow of things, people, and capital challenging. It is the border that makes Korean products desirable for Chinese consumers, and that makes Chinese markets appealing to Korean entrepreneurs. It is the border that renders the Korean-Chinese population's linguistic, cultural, and social fluency in both realms valuable—indeed profitable—because it facilitates the flow of commodities and capital across the borders, bringing Korean products to Chinese consumers and making Chinese markets accessible to South Korean businesses.

Meanwhile, the controversy over THAAD in the mediatized public spheres shows the hegemony of territorial nationalism in the public imaginaries, conditioned by the Cold and Hot wars in 20th century Northeast Asia (H. Kwon 2013). THAAD, regardless of its purpose or efficacy, is a weapon for wars. For whatever purposes or rationales, its presence—or even the discussion of its implementation—evoked the confrontational international relations that people in South Korea and China have endured for decades. Both in South Korea and China, wars are neither simple metaphors nor simulated scenarios. Wars were experienced, told, and taught over generations. Long after the wars, people lived with the political and economic consequences of war—traumatic loss and damages, ideological confrontations between and within the nations, and strict restrictions on travel and trade. Even with the “end” of the Cold War, which conveniently erases North Korea from geopolitical landscapes but still explains the

economic interactions between (former) communist and capitalist countries, people live under the shadows of past and future wars (C. Han 2021).

However, the fronts of potential wars were not drawn between South Korea and China, even though the Chinese government was dissatisfied that the South Korean government cooperated with the United States in their military expansion in East Asia. The potential risk of a North Korean nuclear attack on South Korea justified THAAD implementation, and the Chinese government was concerned that THAAD would strengthen the United States' capacity to monitor Chinese military activities in East Asia. The conflict between South Korea and China received significant media attention regarding THAAD implementation, and ultimately evinced itself in the markets.

During the THAAD controversy, the logic and language of war, which resonates with people's geopolitical imaginaries and experiences, were expanded to the market spheres where the transnational flow of commodities and capital were reevaluated based on national interests. Suddenly, market behaviors were scrutinized within the frame of war. The buying, selling, or even display of "Korean" products was perceived and blamed as benefitting the "enemy"—or the enemy's friend to be more accurate. As confrontational geopolitical imaginaries overshadowed the markets, it became extremely challenging for Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs to register Koreanness as a cosmopolitan quality. The Korean qualities, carefully crafted and promoted by Korean-Chinese businesspeople in the kimchi industry, became inseparable from the understanding of (South) "Korea" as a nation—more correctly, "our" nation's enemy, leaving little or no room for them to be registered as cultural or ethnic values unaffected by the political tension.

The disputes around the implementation of THAAD developed into a "war" in market spheres not because it was an inevitable consequence of such tension, but because the media in both countries contributed to framing the complicated economic,

political, and military dynamics as the conflict between the two states. As Anderson articulates in his classic monograph *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 2006), print-capitalism conditions the development of national consciousness and nationalist disposition beyond face-to-face relations. However, as Anderson later admits in another piece (Anderson 1998), newspapers are never limited to representing the affairs in nations but always “take “this world of mankind” as their domain” (120). Foreign news in national newspapers is crucial for constituting the imaginations and perceptions of the world “in homogeneous, empty time” (Anderson 2006, 24) and, more importantly, registering the perception of “our” nation in relation to other nations and the world.

“THAAD” as a mediatized reality exemplifies how nationalist sentiments develop in media environments where newspapers are not so nation-bounded. As Tönnies (1887) points out, printed materials have the potential to be international, because they are circulated beyond national boundaries. This is especially so now because most newspapers can be accessed digitally from anywhere. In the media environment where the circulation of news(papers) is not bound to the printing of and printed materials; national news(papers) are simultaneously circulated nationally and internationally, reporting news while becoming news for other (foreign) newspapers. In this way, print-capitalism renders the world legible for nationally-bounded people, and makes their national affairs legible for the world.

The circulation of news(papers) beyond national boundaries does not render borders obsolete, as the media representation of “THAAD” reveals. “THAAD” became legible for both Korean and Chinese newspaper readers not just through the foreign news on South Korea or China, but through the coverage of how South Korean and Chinese media reported related political, economic, and military events. In these media representations of foreign media, newspapers focused on how “our” nations were

represented by “other” nations’ newspapers in inaccurate, unfair, and hostile manners, which conditioned the development of the patriotic sentiments toward “our” nations while mobilizing hostility toward the “other” ones. Within the frame of war in which “our” nation is unfairly under attack by the “other” nation, the diverse perspectives, situations, and opinions were reduced to the confrontational positions of “South Korea” and “China,” despite various efforts to destabilize or reorient the imaginaries of the bordered world.

Therefore, what Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs faced during the “THAAD” controversy was a set of imaginaries of a bordered world in conflict with their postnational aspirations. It does not mean that territorial nationalism or the rhetoric of Cold (and Hot) War wins out over cosmopolitan dispositions in contemporary Northeast Asia. Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs’ postnational aspirations and their “Korean” business in China were conditioned by successful sales of Korean products in Chinese retail markets, reflecting Chinese consumers’ cosmopolitan desires to reach, embody, and enjoy something better from somewhere else (Ngai 2003; Davis 2000; Jing 2000; Yu 2014). Multiple, potentially conflictive, and historically situated imaginaries of borders unironically coexist in contemporary Northeast Asia, resonating with people’s perceptions of geopolitical orders, affective attachments of the collective in different scales, and aspirations articulated in market behaviors. “THAAD” articulates the multiplicity of sociopolitical imaginaries of bordered worlds; although it seems extraordinary, it is definitely an ordinary state of affairs for contemporary Northeast Asia.

Chapter 3

Designing Kimchi: Semiotic, Aesthetic, and Logistical Making of “Koreanness”

When I was first introduced to the kimchi factory, I brought my camera kit with me. I was participating in a group project working on the multimedia representation of *che* (vehicle in Mandarin) in China, and I was planning to make a short documentary featuring the transportation of products and people in the kimchi business. The camera kit was for that project, although I assumed it might also be useful for my dissertation project. The president of the factory, Song, who interviewed me during our first meeting, saw the camera kit and asked about my camera and design skills. I told him that I had some experience with photography and design software, although not at the professional level. As the conversation went on, I realized that Song was looking for an employee who could work on package design and product photography. Thus, he saw the potential for a mutually beneficial relationship between the factory, which had need of a photographer / designer, and the ethnographer, who needed access to the world of the kimchi business in China. He immediately offered me a desk next to Zhang, the only designer in charge of design (*sheji*) department in the factory, and allowed me to start work the next day.

Working next to Zhang for a few days, I could better understand the context in which I was admitted to the factory and assigned to work in the design department. Before I joined Tiantian Food, a few Korean-Chinese employees, including two designers, had just left the factory. Zhang, a Han-Chinese male designer who does not speak or read Korean, just come back from medical leave, realizing that he was the only designer left in the office. It was not a satisfactory arrangement from Song's perspective, because Song thought Zhang did not understand Korean language, Korean food, and more critically, Korean aesthetics. The design department was in charge of creating package designs, the online sales website, and other commercials, which included Korean words for the reasons I will elaborate later. Zhang did not know how to type or read Korean, so it was impossible for him to find any typos. Although Zhang began to gain familiarity with the company's products, his knowledge of Korean food was somewhat limited. Zhang's unfamiliarity with Korean culture and language led him to make mistakes that Korean or Korean-Chinese designers would not make: or, his mistakes were likely to be attributed to his non-Korean identity.

Moreover, Song and Choi, Korean-Chinese co-founders of Tiantian Food, were frustrated that Zhang could not produce the quality package designs like those of South Korean food products. Thus, the two owners, who felt that they understood Korean language, Korean food, and Korean aesthetics, ended up spending a lot of time standing behind Zhang's desk and giving him meticulous instructions. In the end, it was not just the camera kit, or my capacity to handle Photoshop and Illustrator, that Song saw as beneficial. My Koreanness, my experience and aesthetic sensibility as a South Korean, was a potential asset to the design department and the company, at least from Song's viewpoint.

I accepted the “job offer” as a designer / photographer not because working in the design team would be helpful for my ethnographic research on the production and distribution of kimchi in China, but because I needed access to the factory. For quite a long time, I had anxiety over being confined in the design department and not being able to understand “more important” operation and dynamics happening in the other parts of the company. I wanted to understand the mobility of people and commodities in the transnational commodity supply chain of Made-in-China kimchi. I did not think that my working experience in the design department would contribute to pursuing this interest. Moreover, I was not sure if package design and product photography were essential parts of the business operation. Admittedly, Song and Choi showed great interest in producing new package designs and product photographs, for which they devoted much time and on which they spent a large amount of money. Still, the project was often delayed due to other urgent and more crucial needs for their business. The progress was slow as design templates went through several rounds of feedback and revision. I felt anxious because I thought I was working on something peripheral and irrelevant, both in terms of the business and my research.

There was another reason I felt working in the design team as a distraction rather than a mode of ethnographic engagement. My role in the design team was to package designs and product photos that could be perceived as “Korean,” which the company approached as a positive added value to their kimchi products. As an anthropologist, I sought to understand why kimchi needs to be presented and promoted as Korean and how Koreanness is defined, understood, and expressed through package designs and photos. Thus, although my ethnographic mode of thinking and observing was by nature interpretive, my work as a designer / photographer was projective and

speculative (Hunt 2011). I felt torn apart between these two roles that required opposing approaches to the work I was assigned.

My fieldwork did not afford a chance to critically appraise the tension between my roles as anthropologist and designer, as other scholars who contemplate the collaborative potentialities of design and anthropology have done (Hunt 2011; Murphy and Marcus 2013; Murphy 2016; Suchman 2007). Although I spent much time working on the project of new package design and product photography, I successfully tried to get out of this job and explore some other opportunities in the factory. As I reorganize my field notes and materials—my design templates and photographs, I realized that designing *was* my mode of ethnographic engagement, although not in a way I had expected. Collecting responses to my design work from coworkers in the factory, sales representatives, and other participants of the process, I pursued—although not entirely consciously—my ethnographic curiosity about how Koreanness is understood and perceived, and why it creates positive value for kimchi products. Design templates and photographs were speculative creations based on my interpretation of Koreanness. Still, they became channels through which participants in the designing process articulated their views and understanding of Korean qualities, inviting them to collectively reflect on what Koreanness means as well as how (and why) it can be incorporated into product designs.

Working as a package designer and product photographer, I not only had a chance to observe and understand commodity supply chains but also obtained insights on how design practices are interconnected with the production and distribution of commodities. Admittedly, the role of the design department is to create visual images on packages that are intended to appeal to potential consumers. However, the package designs went through multiple rounds of feedback and revision not only to make them

look better but also to accommodate various (and sometimes conflicting) functions, needs, and desires that various people in the supply chain thought were crucial. Zhang and I had to communicate and cooperate with various people within and beyond the company so that the packages we created would look good on prints; be suitable for work procedures in the production line; respond to complaints from sales representatives who were in charge of transportation and distribution; ultimately meet consumers' needs and desires. The progress in designing projects was frustratingly slow because our jobs were never done by creating images on our computers.

This chapter is an effort to understand the production and distribution of kimchi from a *designer's* point of view. I do not narrowly define design as an aesthetic prefiguration of visual images of package and product photos (cf. Ingold 2013). When using the term "design," I refer to various reflexive and speculative labors (Hunt 2011; Murphy and Marcus 2013) that shape material forms and qualities of commodities and determine the ways products are made, moved, and consumed. In other words, I will analyze how kimchi manufacturers' decision making is based on their understanding of social relations through which kimchi products are produced, transported, and consumed; how such decisions—ranging from word choices on packages, aesthetic details on product photos to changes in package materials—are intended to make an intervention in the social world (Murphy 2016); and how a commodity such as kimchi is designed through the constant cycles of reflection and speculation, intervention and responses.

In this chapter, I will describe three related aspects of the design work with which I was involved during my fieldwork at Tiantian Food. First, I will describe the design decisions and practice of inserting product names in Korean as part of the package design, and analyze how Chinese consumers' preferences and desires are understood as

well as reflected/ deflected in package design decisions. I will explain the reasoning behind the effort to represent kimchi products as Korean, and how such reasoning crafts the package designs that Zhang and I produced. Second, I will describe the processes of making new product photographs in the company, for which I participated as a photographer. Through an examination of how the product photos I contributed were interpreted and evaluated in terms of Koreanness as part of the creation process, I will explore the cycles of reflection and speculation that shape decision making and design practices in the product photography. I will particularly focus on and analyze how Koreanness is perceived and imagined in various shapes and forms, and how the differences in understanding of Korean quality unfold in the cycles of reflection and speculation. Third, I will track how a product quality control issue is tackled through various design practices, ranging from adding words on packages to logistical coordination with sales representatives. By exploring how various design practices are intended as an intervention in commodity supply chains, I will discuss how the perspective of design—analytical attention to conceptual labors of reflection, speculation, and intervention in the making of commodity supply chains—will contribute to the understanding of commodity production and distribution. In addition, I will also argue that product design can be better understood when it is studied in the context of commodity logistics, where configuration and operation are based upon various design practices.

Inscribing “Korean” Qualities: Aesthetics and Efficacies of Korean Language on Packages

When I started working at Tiantian Food as a designer/photographer, a few product package designs were being reviewed and processed. In this process, an important job of mine was to correctly place Korean words—names of products and label information—a task Zhang could not perform. The job was never so simple as finding and correcting typos. Producing design templates with “correct” Korean words included: choosing a Korean font that complemented the style of the Chinese font used in the package design; adjusting the font size and space (between letters and lines) to maximize the readability of the Korean words; positioning Korean words so that they do not interfere with Chinese words while adding a sense of the exotic for Chinese consumers who do not read Korean. Also, Korean words on the package should abide by Chinese laws, requiring that any foreign (non-Mandarin) words match Mandarin words on the package and that the font size of foreign words is smaller than the corresponding Mandarin words. Designers should also consider the possibilities of copyright violation, especially when choosing the fonts. Violating these laws would lead to a significant fine, payoffs for consumers who (threaten to) report this to the supervising bureau, and additional costs and labor to fix and reprint the packages (See Chapter 2). So, correctly designing packages with Korean words, which was my job, involved producing aesthetically satisfying and legal package designs that would not cause any troubles for the company’s budget and packaging workers.

Of course, I did not at first know how to “correctly” add Korean words. Learning what it means to be “correct” and what factors should be considered in the process

accompanied multiple rounds of feedback and revision, lengthy conversation with Zhang and other employees, and some mistakes that led to extra work for production line workers. In comparison, the aesthetic correction was relatively, and surprisingly, easier to accomplish. I downloaded fashionable and trendy open-source Korean fonts I thought would be suitable for package designs, and adjusted spaces between letters and lines to improve the aesthetics and readability of the Korean words. My knowledge and tacit sensibility of Korean typography were less attributed to my experience in design than to my upbringing in South Korea as a Korean reader. Mobilizing such sensibilities, I was able to both fulfill the need of two Korean-Chinese designers and help Zhang, who could neither read Korean nor take care of the aesthetic coordination of Korean words, create package design templates.

Producing legally correct package designs was a bit harder to learn. Zhang obviously knew more about legal requirements from previous experience and advice from other designers. Nevertheless, his experience could not be translated into guidelines that applied to all situations. This difficulty was attributable not only to complicated legal regulations on food product design but also to some changes in the company's business practices. Tiantian Food started as an export-oriented kimchi manufacturer in 2006, but slowly switched its distribution channels to domestic markets around 2010 because the company saw more potential in the Chinese market than in the overly competitive and less profitable Korean market. More recently, the company had begun to import food products from South Korea under its own brand and package designs and had expanded its sales channels to other countries such as Canada, Thailand, and Vietnam (See Introduction).

Legal regulations for package designs are applied differently depending on whether the products are for export, are imported, or seek domestic sales. Zhang, whose

expertise lies in design instead of law, could not fully guarantee that his package designs did not violate any regulations or copyright rules in China or other countries. To ensure their lawfulness, Zhang and I needed to have design templates scrutinized by other office employees who were more knowledgeable about the related laws and regulations. We often had to reach appropriate governmental authorities, customs brokers, or importers for review, depending on whether the package designs were for imported or exported products. Such internal or external reviews were possible only after completing the package design templates. Making revisions per the reviews could result in other violations, which could (and mostly did) lead to multiple rounds of examination and corrections. This method not only took us very long to finalize a package design but also made it harder for us to systematically master legal requirements.

Under South Korean law, packaging of imported products must include product names and label information in Korean. However, the majority of Made-in-China kimchi exported to South Korea is packaged in 10kg boxes, which are designed to be split into smaller portions by restaurants or shops. Therefore, legally-mandated label information and product names in Korean are only shown on boxes and some bulk packages, which are not (supposed to be) seen by consumers. The way Made-in-China kimchi is exported and distributed in South Korea renders the job of adding Korean on the packages more technical than aesthetic. When assigned to create the package design for kimchi to be exported to South Korea, Zhang and I were told to pay more attention to what information should or should not be included and whether its content and forms were legal than to how to present information in a readable, visually satisfying, and persuasive way for direct sale to customers.

Korean words are not legally mandated for domestically consumed products in China, whether they are domestically produced or imported. Rather, as I mentioned, adding Korean words challenges the process of designing lawful packages. No Korean or other non-Mandarin words should remain unmatched—or untranslated—in Mandarin. Words in Korean (or other non-Mandarin languages) should not be taller than their matching Chinese counterparts. Matching non-Mandarin and Mandarin words should be paired proximately. Despite the burden of meeting such requirements and the potential risks that violation could cause, most kimchi products produced by the company, as with other kimchi companies in China, show at least product names in Korean. Moreover, these Korean words, unlike those on the packages of kimchi for export, are meant to be seen by consumers. They are added on smaller-sized packages of kimchi, which are distributed to retailers or delivered directly to consumers through online shopping platforms. A large quantity of time and energy was spent working on the aesthetic and legal coordination of Korean words, since they are a part of the product packages that are seen, even though they are not necessarily read by Chinese consumers.

After all, why does kimchi need Korean words on its package, since adding Korean words involves so much legal risk and extra work, even though Chinese consumers will not necessarily read them? A practical consideration behind this design rule is that Korean names signal the information on the products to Korean-speaking consumers in China. Although kimchi manufacturers want to reach broader consumers beyond non-Korean and Korean-Chinese communities, the majority and essential part of their consumers are Korean expatriates and Korean-Chinese in major Chinese cities. A large amount of kimchi is sold through so-called Korean supermarkets that distribute imported Korean goods and products targeting Korean and Korean-Chinese

communities, and Korean restaurants that mostly count on Korean and Korean-Chinese regulars (See Chapter 2). Both Korean expatriates and Korean-Chinese in major Chinese cities feel more comfortable speaking and reading Korean, if not speaking Mandarin at all. Even if they do know Mandarin, Chinese names of the kimchi products do not deliver enough and accurate information on the products. For them, small Korean names next to Mandarin product names on the packages are important signs that guide Korean-speaking consumers to buy what they want in China.

The design practice of adding Korean words, however, should not be narrowly understood based on its communicative purpose, considering how much effort is made for aesthetic coordination of the Korean words on the packages, and how such design strategy is aligned with other efforts to register kimchi products as Korean commodities. Since Tiantian Food made its transition to domestic sales, through various channels they strategically emphasize their connection to Korean cultures, such as the owners' ethnic background as Korean-Chinese, the company's successful exports to South Korea, and its collaboration with South Korean food companies. The emphasis on their connection with (South) Korean culture and markets is a strategic effort to register the company and their products as Korean, expecting that such a qualification would add value to their products and boost sales. Cultural intimacy and economic recognition are symbolic capital appropriated and mobilized to support the manufacturer's claims of authenticity and the high quality of their kimchi products, which are commonly known as Korean food among Chinese consumers. Such strategies are more crucial and necessitated considering that the connection between Tiantian Food and South Korea can be interpreted differently. Kimchi made and sold by Tiantian Food is made with ingredients from various regions in China, by production line workers from Northeast and Northwest China, and owned by Korean-Chinese who are

Chinese citizens. So much as their kimchi products can be viewed as Korean as the company intends, it is no surprise that some consumers recognize the company's connection to China and dismiss their claims to Koreanness.

Adding product names in Korean can be interpreted as a part of an effort to qualify kimchi products as Korean goods, as the unusual decision to take them off from packages reveals. When Tiantian Food was about to launch a series of new products for online sales, a nationwide boycott against Korean products went into effect. This was triggered by diplomatic and military conflicts between China and South Korea. As it became evident that the boycott affected the sales of kimchi in many cities and regions, Choi, a co-owner who was in charge of online sales and new products, quickly decided not to add any Korean words on the new products' packages. She also ordered the removal from their online shopping websites of descriptions emphasizing their connection with South Korea. This was replaced with stories emphasizing the Korean-Chinese origin of kimchi and the company, highlighting the "ethnic" connection rather than "(inter)national" one (see Chapter 2). Choi's strategic decision shows that adding Korean product names was a part of the marketing strategy to register kimchi products as Korean, which suddenly became a liability when the nationwide boycott targeted Korean shops and products.

Korean words are added to kimchi packages with a serious aesthetic consideration not only to be read but also to be seen. The presentation of Korean words on packages itself is intended to work as a message, stirring in the imagination that the words will be read by Korean consumers, that products are made for export to South Korea, or that their sales in South Korea or Korean communities are huge enough for the manufacturer to put the product names in Korean. Choi decided not to add any Korean words on new packages because she believed in the efficacies of Korean words—their

capacity to stimulate imagination and thus make consumers believe that their kimchi products have Korean qualities.

Presenting the kimchi products as Korean goods is also entangled with a related yet different business strategy: aligning their products with imported foreign commodities. Not surprisingly, foreign goods are highly valued and desired in various parts of the world in various times, not only because they are scarce and hard to access but also because they are imbued with the imagination of alternative realities of the places from whence the goods come (Appadurai 1986; Cochrane 1970; Goody 1982; Foster 2002; Mintz 1985; Worsley 1957). In post-socialist China, foreign commodities from the developed countries—such as German cars, French wine, and even American fast food—are highly desired despite (and in some senses because of) their high prices. The restricted relationship with capitalist markets during the Cold War made them extremely scarce and only available to those with power; thus, the consumption of rare foreign goods has become a symbolic token of one's social status and accomplishment (Yu 2014). Consumption of foreign products sometimes implies deep distrust of domestically manufactured products as well as the political-economic systems in which commodities are produced and circulated. For example, many middle-class Chinese parents made desperate efforts to buy imported milk formulas as young children died of or were seriously affected by consuming melamine in domestically produced dairy products (Tracy 2010; Yan 2012; Yasuda 2015). Newly accessible foreign commodities in China are mobilized for the cultivation of self-identity, articulation and embodiment of desires, a reconfiguration of the family relationship, and modes of national belonging, for which the foreign origin and nature of the products are crucial (Davis 2000; Jun 2000; Ngai 2003; Rofel 2007). In other words, through the consumption of foreign goods, Chinese consumers aspire to embody the symbols and virtues that are not available in

their local worlds (K. Kim 1994), and for that purpose, they develop a sophisticated sensibility and awareness of the foreignness of commodities in everyday lives.

However, the foreignness of commodities is neither coherently defined nor fixated. The information on the country of origin on the labels or the brand of foreign companies is not the only index from which people discern foreign products. Chinese consumers make careful distinctions among foreign goods purchased directly from foreign countries; foreign goods imported by Chinese trading agencies; imported goods specifically targeting the Chinese market, marked by Chinese on their packages and modifications in the recipe or materials; and copycats that pretend to be foreign or imported (cf. Nakassis 2012; 2013). Adding Korean product names on packages, alongside other aesthetic considerations to make the products “look” Korean, is a strategy to locate the kimchi products within the broad spectrum of foreignness in the Chinese market. In other words, the approach is based on the speculation that the aesthetics Korean words create would align the products with other commodities imported from South Korea, stirring the perception that the products are imported from, exported to, or related to South Korea.

Thus, appropriating “Korean” qualities through various design practices is expected (or speculated) not only to add value to the products and boost their sales in the Chinese markets but also to distance the products from suspicion and the negative perception that domestic goods—especially food products—would have (Yan 2012). Notably, the connection with South Korea is expected (and speculated) to be a positive asset to kimchi products, since the increased nationwide popularity of Korean pop culture over the last two decades (S. Jang 2012) contributes to the positive image of South Korea as a foreign, wealthy, and developed nation as well as to the reputation and sales of South Korean consumer goods (J. Jeong 2012). Such speculative strategies

have been established and reinforced by accumulated experience and reflection in the markets and materialized into Korean product names inserted on packages with careful aesthetic consideration.

Capturing “Korean” Aesthetics: Cycles of Reflection and Speculation in Product Photography

In the previous section, I discussed the logic and strategies behind the decision practice of adding Korean product names on packages. I also explained why appropriating “Korean” qualities in package design is understood to add value to the products by decision-makers in the Chinese kimchi company. Then, what aesthetic features qualify as Korean in the package designs of kimchi products? Who can create and evaluate Korean aesthetics, and how is this accomplished? In this section, I will examine how Koreanness is perceived, evaluated, and captured in the lengthy process of producing product photographs, a process in which I participated as a photographer.

In 2017, when I started my fieldwork at Tiantian Food, co-owner Choi initiated a product photography project for packages and online sales. Sales representatives in major Chinese cities had long complained about the package design, claiming that it was too old-fashioned. They did not want any radical change, which might risk existing consumers’ familiarity with the products and the brand, but wanted some revision to keep up with the aesthetic trend in the market. Sales representatives did not have any say in the design process; neither did they have any specific ideas on the matter. Still, many of them wanted the company to replace old kimchi photos on packages with new

ones. The online sales consulting agency, which was hired to manage the day-to-day operation of online shopping platforms and provide specialized marketing advice for online sales, also recommended a new set of product photographs for both the packages and product descriptions in the shopping mall websites.

Product photography plays a vital role in commodity marketing, especially in the case of food products. When purchasing prepackaged food products, consumers only count on the visual signs of products to judge their qualities (Schifferstein *et al.* 2013). This is why packages of kimchi are partially, if not wholly, transparent, helping potential consumers to check the quality of the products with their eyes. However, many manufacturers do not entirely count on what consumers partially see through vinyl or glass. They want to guarantee a satisfying visual experience that steers the imagination toward gastronomic satisfaction with the products. For this purpose, photos that capture the best qualities of the products are inserted in package designs, commercials, product descriptions seen on online shopping mall pages, and pamphlets for consumers and clients. Especially for online sales, product photographs serve the additional purpose of guiding Chinese consumers on how and with what food to eat kimchi. Many Chinese consumers, apart from Korean-Chinese, vaguely know about kimchi even when they are interested in and consider buying it. Product photographs are mobilized to teach with what kimchi is made, how one should eat kimchi, and what kinds of food should be served with kimchi so that manufacturers can encourage potential consumers to buy and eat more of it. Recognizing the importance of product photographs for retail and online sales as well as responding to calls from sales representatives and online sales agencies, Choi decided to invest in producing new product photographs and assigned the job to Zhang and me at the design department.

The first task we were assigned for this project was to provide some product photos that the online sales agency had requested for the websites. Roughly ten years ago, at just about the time Tiantian Food started sales of kimchi in domestic markets, they hired a professional photographer to create a series of kimchi product photographs for packages and pamphlets. Co-owner Song even purchased a few kimchi photos from South Korean stock photography agencies. Product photos produced or purchased at that time, however, were chosen only in consideration of product packages. Thus, they were numerically insufficient and not suitable for online shopping platforms, according to the online sales agency. Per their advice, Zhang and I took photos of kimchi products for online sales.

The online sales agency had two specific requests. First, they wanted photos from multiple angles, so that potential consumers could better form a mental picture of the products they would buy. Second, they wanted the photos to be in “Korean style (*hanguo fengge*).” The first request was straightforward, but I was perplexed by the second one. There was no example or description of what “Korean style” meant. However, Zhang did not seem to be confused. While I set up lights and a tripod for shooting, Zhang pulled out a few items from his office: straw mats, small-sized crocks, miniatures of hedges, and railings (Figure 1, 2). These were items that implied pre-modern pastoral life in the countryside of Korea. Those items revealed how Zhang interpreted the meaning of Korean style: aesthetic qualities that connect the products with traditional or rural Korean lifestyles, thus bolstering claims of authenticity.



Figure 1 "Korean" accessories. Photographed by the author in 2017.



Figure 2 "Korean" accessories in use. Photographed by the author in 2017.

Zhang's choice was understandable since this kind of styling is quite common in product photos by South Korean kimchi manufacturers, which intend to highlight their products' connection to tradition, nature, and family. Zhang must have seen many kimchi packages and product photos of South Korean manufacturers, which Song and Choi brought to "teach" Zhang Korean aesthetics. It also reverberates with the ways Korean-Chinese culture is represented in China. Like the other 54 ethnic minorities in China, Korean-Chinese in the national media and ceremonies are characterized as purveyors of their ethnic tradition over generations, always in traditional costumes and performing folk dances. Therefore, we created product photos with these Korean items partly because pastoral styling was a convention in the representation of Korean and Korean-Chinese cultures, and partly because we speculated that it would help to emphasize the authenticity and Koreanness of kimchi products.

Photos we took with Korean items, however, were not approved by Choi. Zhang and I put forth great effort to adjust the lighting and background to capture the color and texture of kimchi that could be associated with Koreanness. Even so, Choi did not think our photos captured the best quality of their kimchi products (See Figure 3, 4). Three problems were pointed out at the meeting when we reviewed the images with Choi and online sales agency members. First, we needed better communication and cooperation with the production line to prepare the best-looking (and photogenic) kimchi at the right timing. Kimchi in our photos did not look "fresh" or "delicious" because the production line could not know what they needed to consider for preparing kimchi for photography. Second, while Zhang and I had a skill at photography, we were poor at placing kimchi on dishes in an appealing way or taking care of all the details of the kimchi's shape, color, and arrangement. Choi and online sales agency

members attributed this lack of skill to our masculinity, saying that “men do not have delicate hands and do not know how to attend to details!”.



Figure 3 An Example of Bad Kimchi Photos. Photographed by the author in 2017.



Figure 4 An Example of Bad Kimchi Photos. Photographed by the author in 2017.

Most importantly, Choi and the online sales agency members thought the photos felt old-fashioned because of the items we used to create a Korean style. For the online sales agency, this was especially problematic since online sales mainly targeted young middle-class consumers. The images of traditional Korean customs and pastoral lifestyles may be perceived as “Korean style” for older Chinese or bolster the claims to authenticity in the South Korean kimchi markets. However, according to the online sales agency, young Chinese consumers’ understanding of Korean culture is primarily affected by their exposure to K-POP and Korean TV shows, which represent or feature South Korea as a modern, urban, and energetic society (Wang 2016). Therefore, when the agency requested product photos in “Korean style,” they expected the images to incorporate modern, urban, and sophisticated feelings that Chinese youngsters can associate with South Korea, which is the opposite of what Zhang and I tried to register as traditional and authentic Korean culture. In sum, the disapproval of our first shooting taught us a lesson on how we could better communicate and cooperate with other contributors to the photography project. More importantly, we learned to recalibrate our understanding of the Koreanness we expressed in the product photos.

Since the photos Zhang and I worked on were not good enough for use, Choi decided to hire a professional photographer who understood product photography for online sales. There were further changes based on what we learned from the last failure. First, online sales agency members came to the shooting and shared their views on-site with Choi and the photographer. In this way, their feedback on photos could be immediately reflected, rather than waiting for another photo shoot. Second, more care and people were put into the preparation and plating processes. Before the shoot, the production line manager was given a list of products and raw materials so that the photographers could have the best-looking kimchi and its raw materials ready on time.

Plating kimchi for the shooting was assigned to the group of Korean-Chinese women, including Choi, her sister Choi L., and her housemaid. The Korean-Chinese female plating team took care of all the details—color, texture, amount of sauce, the way leaves were posed, and even a dash of pepper powder on plates—before the dishes were handed to the photographer. The photographer, with her own assistant (also female), made some adjustments to the dishes considering the lights and background. I ran between the conference room/studio and the kitchen/plating room to move the dishes, while also delivering feedback between the two teams.

The second attempt, although it was costly and demanded the time and labor of many people in the factory, turned out to be more successful. Some photos made it to new packages and online shopping mall websites (See Figure 5, 6).



Figure 5 A Photo by the Professional Photographer (Photo Courtesy of Tiantian Food).



Figure 6 A Photo by the Professional Photographer (Photo Courtesy of Tiantian Food).

Nevertheless, with some discussion and consideration. Choi decided to have another shoot with the photographer for several reasons. First, at their first shoot, they could not take photos of some products and materials because of limited time. The professional photographer had to spend a couple of hours to turn the conference room into a studio, and the plating team had to learn how to plate kimchi for professional photographs. It was not a waste of time, but it took a significant amount of the time available on that day.

Second, Choi was not pleased with the color tones of the kimchi in the photos. She thought that they were too cold and not appetizing for kimchi eaters. Some photos, despite being well taken, did not properly capture the ideal texture and features of kimchi because the photographer did not “know kimchi or Korean food,” as she confided to Choi. Some of the cabbage kimchi photos focused on the bottom of the cabbage, which is not an edible part (See Figure 7). Pictures of white kimchi, of which

the essential element is not cabbage or radishes but soup, focused on radishes instead of soup (Figure 8). Third, Choi thought that the plates did not look elegant or “Korean” enough in the photos. Dishes in the pictures were either aesthetically unsatisfying because they were too shiny and ill-shaped, or looked “too cheap,” a quality the company did not want to be associated with their products (Figure 9). Later, Choi bought some expensive dishes on her business trip to Seoul, expecting that the new dishes would improve the quality of the photos. So, with the hope that the experience of the second try would result in better photos at the third shoot, we arranged another shooting and had every product, material, and all personnel ready in advance.



Figure 7 An Example of Bad Photos by the Professional Photographer (Photo Courtesy of Tiantian Food).



Figure 8 An Example of Bad Photos by the Professional Photographer (Photo Courtesy of Tiantian Food).



Figure 9 Ill-Shaped Dish (Photo Courtesy of Tiantian Food).

However, the day before the arranged shoot, the photographer got ill and canceled her shooting. The photography team could postpone the shoot, but it would mean that much preparation already done in production lines would go to waste. It was hard for everyone to reschedule. Zhang and I suggested that we could try taking photos since everything and everyone was ready except the photographer, a role we had initially played. I had a camera, which gave me access to the factory, lights, and background papers. We thought we had learned from the photographer how to set up lights and background. There were some advantages, too: we could shoot more if one day was not enough since we were at the factory all the time (besides, neither Zhang nor I would be paid for the shooting, unlike the professional photographer who would charge per hour or day). There was still some hope that I, as a South Korean, could better bring my Korean perspectives into the photos so that shortcomings due to lack of understanding of kimchi and Korean food culture could be communicated and overcome. Besides, there was nothing to lose since we could always bring the photographer back if our photos were not good enough.

The third shoot went as planned, except that Zhang and I replaced the professional photographer. The online sales agency did not join us since there had already been enough communication about what they saw as good photos for online shopping mall webpages. As a result, this shooting became a collaborative effort among people in the company, thus making it possible to take more time to evaluate the photos, fix the shortcomings, and take more photos. The plating team could experiment with different ways of presenting kimchi on the newly-bought Korean plates until we figured out which ones were the most photogenic. Zhang and I switched locations of lights, adjusted their brightness, and changed background papers until we figured out the optimal lighting and backgrounds for kimchi photos. We had many conversations, both

in the studio and the sample kitchen, about how to present and capture the qualities of kimchi, and how to introduce various ways to eat kimchi. With no time constraints, both the plating team and the photographer team gained valuable lessons through mistakes and repetition, which were apparent in the photos that finally made it to online shopping malls and packages (See Figure 10, 11).



Figure 10 A Kimchi Photo. Photographed by the author in 2017.



Figure 11 A Kimchi Photo. Photographed by the author in 2017.

The new photos, however, did not replace all of the original product photos that Song had helped create ten years ago. Song, who was less engaged with the photography project, did not think that the newly taken photos were Korean enough. He told me that some images were too unnatural because the details of the kimchi were artificially arranged (See Figure 12) and therefore failed to create the feeling of a homemade dish that would have been served on a consumer's table. He added that our attempt to control every detail was a "Chinese" mentality, which he said was nurtured in the highly disciplined everyday life under the Communist regime. To his mind, Korean quality was associated with a casualness—embodying its positive qualities in unpretentious and natural ways—nurtured in the more democratic and undisciplined social atmosphere of South Korea. Based on such reasoning, some old photos, which Song believed to be more genuinely Korean, did not get replaced and are still in use for packages and online shopping websites.



Figure 12 An example of the "Unnatural and not-so-Korean Photos." Photographed by the author in 2017.

The old photos were, in some respects, successful for attracting consumers. The online sales agency provided statistics on which photos led consumers to click the “purchase” button. One of the old images, which was not replaced by a new one, was especially successful for luring consumers. At least, many consumers clicked the “purchase” button when the photo was shown on the website. Still, it is hard to tell whether many consumers preferred the old photo over others. It is even harder to determine whether they viewed the photo as more Korean than others, as Song viewed it. However, the old picture that Song wanted to keep did its job well at online sales, thus convincing other decision-makers to keep it.

Koreanness in product design processes is far from coherent or fixed. It emerges, disappears, and contradicts other versions of Koreanness in its making. People involved in designing processes have different understandings of what makes kimchi look Korean, based on their experience with, exposure to, expectation of, and imaginings about products and phenomena they associate with Korea. The differences in their ideas about and ideals of Koreanness often go unnoticed, only becoming explicit when their responses to the results of the same package designs or product photographs diverge. However, I do not claim that Koreanness in product design and photography is merely imaginary and delusional. Even when there is no consensus on what is Korean and how it can be actualized in packages and photographs, the pursuit of Korean aesthetics directs the ways product designs and photographs are created and shapes the social relations through which product design and photographs are processed. People involved in our projects readily make extra time and effort to create Korean qualities in their product packages and photography, which often leads to significant delays and inefficiencies. Song and Choi are influential in decision-making processes not just because they are founders and owners of the company but also because they are

Korean-Chinese who are supposed to have more experience with Korean society than anyone in the factory, and thus are assumed to make better judgments on whether kimchi photos and package designs look Korean. My input as a designer/photographer is acknowledged, often more than those of more experienced employees like Zhang, because I was expected to know more about Korean aesthetics as a native South Korean.

Creating a package design or product photograph requires numerous decisions among infinite choices. A speculative vision on Koreanness is expressed by a set of design decisions that aim to create certain aesthetic effects and social impacts, i.e., persuading consumers to buy and consume products. In other words, speculation on Koreanness in design processes “renders this potential infinity of contexts into something finite, grammatical, and seductive” (Appadurai 2013, 262), giving Koreanness a particular form and shape. Speculative articulation of Korean quality provides the condition in which diverse interpretation and imagination of Koreanness are brought forward, compared, and discussed. Through the interaction facilitated by the speculative enclosures, the implication of Koreanness can now be addressed at the level of design decisions on each detail, such as background items, the shape of plates, and color tones of the kimchi. In other words, speculation is articulated into the enclosure of infinite contexts, while reflection encourages reopening the choices and again navigating the alternatives. Differences in the understanding of Korean culture, therefore, are not obstacles for producing designs that incorporate Korean qualities. Instead, the differences, being articulated in design choices, open up space for collective reflection in which participants proactively share their perception of Koreanness and evaluate its implementation in product design and photography.

As described in the case of product photography, collective reflection on Koreanness does not result in consensus on its implication. The decision-making process, especially

in a corporate setting, is far from democratic. One's intimacy with Korean culture shapes the speculative vision on Koreanness as more authoritative. Others can challenge such authority based on their knowledge of Chinese consumers, arguing that they do not seek to answer what Korean means, but what can be perceived as Korean by Chinese consumers as the positive value of kimchi. Through multiple cycles of speculation and reflection, a speculative vision of Koreanness ultimately makes its path into some design decisions either by way of persuasion or enforcement; and is materialized into packages and photographs that are publicly circulated alongside the commodity supply chains. However, the cycles of speculation and reflection do not end with the finalization and publication of designs. In the next section, I will explain how the cycles of speculation and reflection, a mechanism through which a commodity is designed, can be applied in order to understand the logistical configuration of commodity supply chains.

Logistics of Design, Design of Logistics: Solving "Gas Problem" through Design

Selling packaged kimchi to Chinese consumers, which represented a significant transition from being an export-oriented business for the company, accompanied an unexpected challenge: gas. Kimchi slowly ferments after it is made, emitting carbon dioxide. This slow fermentation is what imparts kimchi's unique flavor and texture. Carbon dioxide gas, mixed with scents of garlic, green onion, and ginger in kimchi, increases while packaged kimchi is transported, displayed on shelves of supermarkets, and stored in consumers' refrigerators. The gas makes a kimchi package swell, and it comes out with a pungent odor when one opens the package.

The strong odor from spices is endurable or even enjoyable when one eats kimchi, for whom the smell is a part of the gastronomic experience. However, it is not when the smell is separated from eating experiences. When one smells kimchi in a bus or airplane, when the odor of kimchi is spread into one's refrigerator, or when one smells "kimchi breath," the smell does not remind people of the delicious taste of kimchi but draws instant repulsion. This explains why the smell is identified as the problem for the globalization of kimchi—state-sponsored expansion of the kimchi industry beyond South Korea since the 1990s (K. Han 2000). Several "odorless" or "deodorized" kimchi were invented with state or corporate sponsorship, assuming that non-Korean consumers would be encouraged to try kimchi if its strong smell is controlled or removed (Ku 2014, 117).

Since it spreads quickly and easily beyond one's table or house, kimchi's pungent odor is usually the first—and in many cases the only—part of non-Koreans' experience of kimchi. And the smell is not simply a problem of personal taste but imbued with judgment on Korean culture and society in general (Manalansan 2006). A series of westerners who visited Korea left a vivid description of kimchi's pungent smell, showing their despise on "uncivil" Korean culture and lifestyle (Ku 2014). Many Koreans and Korean diaspora internalized the racialized gaze on kimchi, feeling shame for the smell of kimchi that comes out of their bags or bodies (K. Han 2000). Thus, the smell of kimchi, even though many Koreans embrace it as an indispensable part of their foodways, constantly reminds them of their belonging to a developing country that struggled to keep up with global economic development and modernization. The country's recent economic development and cultural achievement contribute to a more positive attitude toward kimchi, which led to its promotion in international markets (K. Han 2000). Still, the smell is stigmatized as the symbol of cultural backwardness and

premodernity of Korean societies, which requires innovative methods to control, quarantine, or remove (Ku 2014).

In this context, a swollen package with malodorous gas is a problem not only of aesthetics but also of cultural identity. Aesthetically speaking, it does not look good on the shelf, and the gas coming out of the package gives consumers a negative first impression. Swollen package triggers potential consumers' suspicion, making them doubt if it has any problem or stays on the shelf for too long. Such suspicion poses a significant challenge to kimchi manufacturers in China, where a series of food safety scandals make consumers extremely sensitive to the issue. In addition, the kimchi manufacturers need to carefully balance between authenticity and acceptability: in other words, between what manufacturers perceive as Korean in kimchi and what Chinese consumers expect from Korean kimchi. A strong odor is a part of what authentic Korean kimchi offers and Chinese consumers enjoy fermented foods with strong odors. Still, it does not mean that Chinese consumers accept or appreciate the fermented scent when they buy Korean kimchi. A pungent odor does not cohere with what they perceive as or expect from Korean food, food from a modern, urban, and energetic country they see through Korean drama or music video (Wang 2016). Therefore, the smell is a crucial design factor in creating a Korean experience of kimchi in the Chinese markets, which requires innovative interventions in production, distribution, and marketing.

To deal with such challenges, Tiantian Food tried to use the package design to educate their customers about the issue. They added clauses such as: "kimchi is a naturally fermented food product; therefore, some packages might be swollen because of gas created during the fermentation process. It is normal, and thus safe to eat." They put a more detailed explanation about swollen packages and gas on the pages of the

online shopping mall, and on a note that was included in the parcel delivered to online shoppers. The explanation stated: what fermentation is, how carbon dioxide is produced during the fermentation process, why the gas may smell bad to some people, and how consumers can tell the difference between properly fermented kimchi and a rotten product. A similar explanation, in much more concise and friendly language, was also provided when online shoppers left negative comments because of swollen packages and ill-smelling gas. Office employees who were in charge of online customer service often made long speeches about fermentation when unsatisfied consumers contacted them through online chat or by phone.

Despite the company's efforts to educate its consumers with language on packages, notes on web pages, online chatting, and phone calls, they realized that such efforts could not entirely persuade their customers. Some simply did not read these words. Some did not believe what the producers said and refused to be persuaded, stubbornly arguing that the kimchi they bought had gone bad and asking for a refund or return. Some disputed the company's explanation based on what they learned online and believed the company fabricated a false statement to protect their business.

While not giving up on trying to persuade consumers with words, the company also tried to resolve the issues of gas by redesigning the packages. First, it put a small pack of air absorbent that could absorb a certain amount of carbon dioxide inside the kimchi package. This method has been widely used by South Korean manufacturers and was introduced to the factory through K Food. K Food is a renowned South Korean food company that has expanded its sales of Korean food products in the Chinese market, including kimchi. When K Food outsourced the manufacture of their kimchi products to Tiantian Food, K Food asked Tiantian Food to import and use South Korean absorbents for their kimchi products. Finding the absorbents effective for removing gas

within the sealed kimchi packages, Tiantian Food decided to apply the South Korean absorbents for the kimchi products of their own brand.

Second, the company applied a so-called “venting valve” to some packages, so that gas could be released from packages without breaking the seal. Although the absorbent was effective for removing gas, this method had two problems: it was expensive and less effective for large-sized packages. Thinking of an alternative way to reduce the gas, Song and Choi, who were connoisseurs of coffee and regulars at a neighborhood coffee roaster, came up with the idea of applying the venting valve on coffee bean packages to their kimchi packages. Through some trials and modifications, they succeeded in implementing the valves to their kimchi packages. The valves, which were applied inside the packages and connected to small holes on the packages, allowed gas inside the packages to come out while blocking outside contaminants from entering the packages. Therefore, the gas could be vented without breaking the seal of the packages or contaminating the kimchi contained therein. The notable difference between coffee beans and kimchi, however, was that kimchi packages contained some liquid, and it might come out through the valve if the liquid touched it. To prevent such leakage, with reattach-able sealing stickers were added to cover small holes on the valve. In this way, sales representatives and vendors could control when and where the gas was vented from packages by taking off and putting on stickers.

This method was used for a couple of years, but not without concern. First, it required a few more steps when making the packaging: drilling small holes, attaching valves, and placing sealing stickers. Package manufacturers could not do this work, so the factory designated a few young workers with adept hands to do these jobs. Second, this method required the constant attention and care of wholesalers and vendors. The valve would be useless if wholesalers and vendors did not take off stickers to vent the

gas, and would make more trouble—leakage and smell—if the valve was left open too long. So, the factory needed to educate sales representatives and vendors on when and how to vent the gas by taking off and putting on stickers.

Those potential problems or concerns materialized when K Food decided to apply venting valves for their products. Based on advice from their own research team, K Food made a few changes to this method and decided to use valves made by a South Korean manufacturer. The South Korean venting valves let out the gas but keep the liquid inside the package, so they did not require re-attachable stickers to prevent leakage. However, the seemingly better (and more expensive) South Korean valves created an unexpected problem when the products were launched. While the one-way valve solved the problems of swollen packages and possible leakage, without the stickers, gas—and bad smell—was vented out through the valves all the time and could not be controlled. Attaching resealable stickers could not be a solution for K Food, since their vendors carried a large number of products and thus did not have time to take off and put on stickers one by one. Realizing that the new method created a new problem that discouraged consumers from buying the products, K Food quickly decided to return to their original solution of air absorbent.

There is another solution for swollen packages besides changing package designs, such as adding language to educate consumers or valves for removing gas. Kimchi packages swell because of lactic acid fermentation, which is time and temperature-sensitive. High-temperature pasteurization would fundamentally eradicate the problem by preventing further fermentation in the package. However, it is highly undesirable since the unique flavor, smell, and taste of kimchi products are produced through ongoing fermentation. Still, under the careful management of time and temperature, one can slow down the fermentation of kimchi, so that fermentation-related problems

happen less often, are less severe, and occur much later. For example, if kimchi is stored in the warehouse at a very low temperature for a couple of days, before it is packaged and readied for transport, the lactobacillus in kimchi becomes very inactive until the temperature rises during or after transport. In this way, sales representatives and their vendors could get a much less fermented kimchi product, which would make kimchi packages less swollen.

This time and temperature management required cooperation among the various participants involved in the distribution of the products. For example, the temperature and amount of time spent in trucks needed to be closely monitored, since kimchi would be more fermented than expected if the products stayed in vehicles for too long at a higher temperature. Thus, the factory or sales representatives tried to ensure that truckers did not turn off or turn down the refrigerator, waste too much time loading and unloading other clients' goods, or make detours to save costs and make more money. Furthermore, the factory and sales representatives worked to shorten the time between the manufacture and consumption of the products. The production line managers carefully arranged production schedules so that kimchi products had enough time to be cooled down in the warehouse (for slowing down lactic acid fermentation) while ensuring that they did not stay in the factory for too long. Sales representatives also carefully calibrated the amount and timing of their weekly orders to minimize the numbers of kimchi boxes sitting idly in their warehouses. Sometimes, this strategy meant delaying production or making up additional orders at the last minute, both resulting in overwork of production line workers at night and on weekends.

By showing how various methods were mobilized to solve the “gas problem,” I aim to challenge how design—especially product design—is understood in the narrow contexts of aesthetic prefiguration or material composition. Keith Murphy calls for attention to anthropological studies of design (and the collaborative relationship between design and anthropology) since they illuminate “the social world not just as it exists, but also in relation to the conditions of its making” (2016, 443). He emphasizes the roles of intention and intervention in the anthropological understanding of social relationships, in which designed things mediate human intention and become a means of intervention. Arjun Appadurai, when explaining how he develops his interest in “social life of things” into “social life of design,” argues that what designers actually engage with is not a single isolated object but a context in which an object is situated and related to other objects and people (2013, 263-5). Being aligned with the anthropological studies of design, I propose to expand our attention to how social relations of commodity supply chains are mobilized as both means and objects of design. Innovative intervention to solve the “gas problem” was not only made on the products themselves, such as inserting an explanation on the package or adding a valve. It was also made on a social network comprised of things and people that were mobilized to produce and transport kimchi products, for example, instructing sales representatives to remove gas through valves and supervising the route and temperature of refrigerated trucks. The latter may not be perceived as a design practice if it is understood as an aesthetic configuration of visual appearance. However, revisions in both package designs and logistical reconfiguration of social relationships are discussed and considered as possible interventions to solve the quality control problem. Both modes of interventions are speculative business decisions, of which

consequences are neither entirely certain nor predictable and which are under reflexive scrutiny, subject to further readjustment and reconfiguration.

The cycles of speculation and reflection in the first two examples—adding Korean product names and creating Korean style in product photographs—are efforts to coordinate the visual and material composition of the products with the semiotic or symbolic reading of them by potential consumers. The example of the “gas problem” shows how the cycles of speculation and reflection are mobilized to rearrange the relationship between the material composition of products and social relations through which the products are produced, transported, and consumed. Speculative interventions, which are carefully examined, evaluated, and readjusted based on reflexive communication, are intended to make changes in the material, semiotic, and social configuration of commodities. Since “design is not about isolated objects” (Appadurai 2013, 259), the scope of product design is not limited to the material or aesthetic figuration of the products, but instead extends to the social relationship of commodity supply chains. We cannot understand the nature and mechanism of design as an intentional intervention that reproduces the everyday world (Murphy 2016, 443) without recognizing that a social relationship is also *designed*, which contextualizes our understanding of design within the operation of capital. This is what I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Reordering Orders: The Politics of Disjunctures in Logistics and Communication

A month had passed since I got into the company, and my fieldwork was slow. I spent more time writing fieldnotes on my desk than doing fieldwork, which made me anxious and frustrated. There were many reasons that my fieldwork was “slow” in the first month. First, I got into Tiantian Food just before Chinese New Year, during which workers would go home, and the whole production line would stop for two weeks. There would be no supply of products during the break, but as the owner Choi put it, their customers’ mouths would not take a break. Actually, the Chinese New Year was the time customers bought kimchi more than any other time. It is customary, called *songli*, that Chinese send gifts to family and friends to celebrate Chinese New Year, and many consumers buy kimchi as a gift. So sales representatives ordered a large amount of kimchi to keep up with the demand before and during the holiday, which meant the production line of Tiantian Food must have manufactured kimchi at a much faster pace. To sum up, it was not ideal for the company to assign me a new job during its busiest season. People in the company were working and moving too fast, which ironically forced me to stagnate.

Second, the office of the design department was spatially separated from the main office, which did not help me comprehend the dynamics in the company. Tiantian Food had four buildings: the kimchi production line, the seafood production line, the meat production line, and the building used initially as Song's house. The main office, where Choi and other office employees in accounting, sales, and purchase departments worked (it was noteworthy that most of the office workers in this office were women, including Choi), was attached to the kimchi production line. The main office, under the leadership of Choi, took care of day-to-day business in the company. The design department, where Zhang and I belonged, was not a part of the main office. Instead, it was located in the building that used to be Song's house. This building had several offices, including a laboratory, a sample room (where Choi L., the owner Choi's older sister, worked on developing new recipes or new products), a conference room, Song's office, Kim's office/bedroom, and the design department's office. While the laboratory and sample room, located on the first floor of the building, had predominantly female workers, the second floor of the building was a kind of "boys' club," as Song, Kim, Zhang, and I were all male. Song, the co-owner and co-founder of Tiantian Food, did not always stay in his office as he spent more time meeting his (potential) clients and partners outside the office. His office, which used to be the main bedroom for Choi and Song (they are a married couple with two kids), was used more often to drink tea, take a rest, and think alone. Kim, a Korean businessman who introduced me to Tiantian Food, lived in his office which used to be Choi's daughter's bedroom. His business was to import and sell Korean rice wine, which was not related to but in loose partnership with Tiantian Food. He also spent a lot of time outside the office to meet his clients. Most of the time, the second floor was occupied by just Zhang and me, and we did not share the busy rhythm of the company as the main office workers or production line workers did.

Our work was often punctuated by sudden visits by Song and Kim, who checked in with us when they came back from their meetings outside. They often brought me to their office to talk about their business plans and ideas over cups of coffee and tea, which often took a couple of hours.

Third, the way lunchtime was arranged created some distance between me and the company dynamics outside the design office. Production line workers came to work at 7:30 AM, had lunch at 11:30 AM, and finished their regular work at 4:30 PM when they had dinner. Office workers came to work later than production line workers: they started their work at 8:00 AM, had lunch at noon, and went home at 5:00 PM. Song and Choi, the owners, came to work much later than either production line or office workers. They usually came to work between 9 and 10 AM and went back home earlier than 5 PM, but sometimes they worked much later than 6 PM. Their work schedule fluctuated as they had a lot of meetings and banquets outside the office. They did not always eat lunch at work, as they often had appointments with friends and business partners outside the office. When they ate lunch at work, lunchtime was usually later than noon, but it was far from fixed. They did not eat at the cafeteria as the production line and office workers did. They usually ate in the conference room, asking Choi L. to cook something in her sample room—which used to be Song and Choi’s kitchen. In this way, they did not have to eat with other workers, and more importantly, they could eat Korean food. Sometimes they ate “samples” that Choi L. made, or that Song and Choi brought back from business trips to South Korea. Kim would join if he were in his office, and I became a part of the managerial-level, privately arranged Korean lunch. Having lunch with them gave me opportunities to learn more about the company from the perspectives of Song, Choi, and in some ways, Kim. Still, at the same time, it

separated me from the rhythm of work experienced and configured by the production line and office workers.

“Fieldwork” during Fieldwork

I needed a breakthrough but did not know how to have one. I was sitting at a desk in the design department, but I did not have any work that required my attention and effort for 8 hours each day for the first few months. Kim gave me some work as he needed some assistance for his rice wine business, like accounting and communication with Chinese vendors. I regularly had lunch with Song, Choi, and Choi L. and listened to their conversations about work. Nevertheless, I was eager to learn about how the company worked rather than just how owners evaluated the company’s status. Or, to put it differently, I needed more at-work experiences to understand what they talked to each other about during the lunch. I was afraid that being admitted as a photographer / designer limited my position in the company, confining me to the corner office of the isolated building. I was worried about the spatial, temporal, and gendered situation I was stuck in.

A week after the Chinese New Year break, Song asked me to come to his office. I thought it was another casual coffee break with Song on the second floor of the building. However, in this meeting, Song gave me a mission I did not expect at all. He asked me to do some “fieldwork” in the company and create a report. He quickly explained why he wanted me to take on this new mission. He had recently received the annual financial statement of the previous year from the accountant. It stated that the company was producing kimchi more than ever, but that profits had barely increased. Song believed that the problem stemmed from excessive labor costs. He conjectured

that the company was hiring too many production line workers as well as overworking them. He told me that the company could produce the same amount of kimchi with fewer workers if the workers were better organized and the orders from sales representatives were finalized in advance. He speculated that last-minute changes in the sales representatives' orders made it impossible for the production line to plan ahead, which led to unnecessary waste of materials and labor power. Song knew the problems and wanted them to be fixed. But he needed evidence that his speculative view was correct. He needed strong evidence to show the sales representatives, convincing them to make orders in advance and not to make last-minute changes. Thus, he wanted me to jump into the "field"—the production line and main office—to listen to what the production line and office workers had to say and to thereby create a report that could be presented to sales representatives. Song would deliver the report at Tiantian Food's annual company-wide meeting of sales representatives, which was forthcoming.

Of course, I accepted the mission. I could not have been happier with it. I longed for opportunities that would take me out of the corner office on the second floor of the isolated building. I wanted to have some firsthand experience of how the company worked and how various parts of the company were interconnected. I could not get that experience since I was assigned to the design department when there was not much work to be done related to photography and design. Now I was given a task that granted me access to various groups of people working in various places in the company.

At the same time, I had to think about the nature of this "fieldwork" and the report I was expected to create. I knew that the "fieldwork" Song asked for was different from the ethnographic fieldwork I would do for my dissertation. They were different not

because ethnography is more descriptive of sociocultural phenomena, while the report would be intended to make changes and interventions. Doing and writing ethnography is always interventional, while reports for business and industry have rigorous demands for objective truth. They were different, I thought, because they aimed at different kinds of intervention. As an ethnographer, I wanted to make positive sociocultural changes in the field through the collaborative processes of doing and writing ethnography. Business reports and research aimed to diagnose what one could do differently for more efficient production, faster distribution, and more sales of commodities, which ultimately served the purposes of capital. The interventions made based on the business report might benefit some interlocutors, such as Song and Choi, if the changes resulted in more profits. However, some changes could have been detrimental to other interlocutors. For example, some production line workers might have lost their jobs as the company managed to find ways to manufacture more kimchi with fewer workers. I had to consider the differences and potential conflicts between ethnography and business reports as well as between my role as an ethnographer and my job as a company worker.¹

With both excitement and hesitation, I did my “fieldwork” within the field—creating reports and circulating and presenting them at various meetings. But this was not my main job in the company. While I did various kinds of jobs in the company besides my role as a designer/photographer, most of my work did not involve any field research or reports. Moreover, writing and circulating reports is not a conventional mode of communication within a small company like Tiantian Food. So much as my

¹ Even though I was not paid, I could not do anything that would be perceived by management as detrimental to the company and I could not disobey orders from the president or manager. Any such disruptive actions would bar me from further access to the field.

existence in the company—a South Korean graduate student studying in the United States coming to work unpaid and being involved in various projects in the company—was uncommon, the reports I wrote (or was asked to write) were an unconventional and somehow unprecedented form of communication. Still, doing “fieldwork” and writing reports were the ways I learned / came to understand how Tiantian Food worked, or more specifically, how orders for the products were being processed among different parts of the company and between the company and sales representatives. The “fieldwork” also brought my attention to various scales and layers of relationships within and beyond the company: for example, between the company and its sales representatives; the office and the production line; the owner and their sales representatives; the owners and individual employees they hired; and my relationship with the company as an ethnographer and unpaid worker. The communication and interaction among people in various roles dictated how commodities like kimchi were produced, transported, and consumed. Glitches in their cooperation—last-minute changes of orders, delays in the production process, misunderstanding or miscommunication, and so on—were materialized in various forms to various people in the supply chain: overtime work for production line workers, compromise or deterioration in the quality of products, and decreases in profit. And the ways “problems” were identified, analyzed, and acted upon—including my mission—revealed the political nature of social relationships within and beyond the company, which shaped and were shaped by the ways commodity chains were configured.

In this chapter, I will examine logistical coordination, communication, and working conditions in the supply chain of Korean kimchi by comparing the perspectives of owners, managers, workers, and sales representatives of Tiantian Food. I will demonstrate how people at Tiantian Food diagnosed problems and suggested solutions,

which I collected through my “fieldwork” and compiled as “reports.” This chapter centers around the two reports I wrote and circulated at Tiantian Food. The first one was based on the mission Song assigned to me at the beginning of my fieldwork. The second one was made after I visited the production line workers’ hometown during Chinese New Year in 2018. Both reports diagnosed problems that might jeopardize communication and logistical coordination in the supply chain, but from different perspectives, interests, and motives. I will explain how orders—both orders as products to be shipped and orders as commands—were processed to produce, transport, and deliver kimchi and how such processes necessitated the (re)ordering of social relations within and beyond the company. I will analyze how particular disjunctures in social relations—linguistic, spatiotemporal, and regional differences—are viewed as the sources of the problems that compromise the qualities of products and workers’ lives. But at the same time, I will argue that those disjunctures are reinforced and reproduced for capitalist circulation, conditioning the overexploitation of workers to manufacture the commodities at the pace “the market” wanted.

Last-minute Changes: Same Problem, Different Consequences

As Song assigned me the task of writing a report for the annual meeting with sales representatives in 2017, I started roaming around the company. My goal was to comprehend the organization of Tiantian Food, meet and get to know people whom I could not encounter when I was in the design department office, and identify logistical and communicative challenges faced by various departments. Getting to know people in the production line was not easy. There was no way I could get familiar with 200 people in the production line in such a short time. Besides, many production line

workers wore masks and smocks, and the indoor manufacturing floor was always filled with dehumidifier noise. I could not see their faces, clothes under masks, nor hear their voices, nor could they see or recognize me with my voice and face. Still, I could recognize (and be recognized by) some people, usually those in charge of each department or team. They gave me a tour of their sections, and without much asking, they started talking about their problems. Sometimes, conversations continued as I volunteered to help with their work for a few hours, such as by seasoning kimchi or moving boxes.

I spent a lot of time with Lin and Wang, who were respectively in charge of the warehouse and kimchi production line. They were a married couple from Anhui Province, and their daughter also worked at the office. Lin, Wang's wife, was one of a few production line workers who had been with the company since its founding in 2006. She started as a regular production line worker but was promoted to team captain, vice production line manager, and finally to the head of the production line (*changzhang*) as Choi L. moved to the new products development department. Wang, who joined the company after Lin settled down at Tiantian Food, oversaw the warehouse department, where workers packed finished products into boxes and loaded them onto delivery trucks.

Both Wang and Lin complained for hours when I approached them. Their complaints basically did not diverge much from Song's conjecture: production line workers suffered from overwork, which compromised their general productivity. There were too many and often last-minute changes in orders, which added confusion and workloads. However, their complaints were registered in slightly different contexts. First, they claimed that the production line was understaffed. Wang and Lin insisted that they needed more space, more people, and more facilities to keep up with the

orders without overexploiting production line workers and compromising the quality of their products. They complained that many young and smart workers left as they felt exhausted after a few weeks or months, leaving only old and slow workers in the production line. Second, their complaints were oriented not only to sales representatives who made last-minute changes in their orders but also to the office who did not care about the production line. Lin and Wang expressed their frustration over the office workers: "Office workers accept last-minute changes without considering the production line's schedule or capacity. They can go back to their home in the city at 5 PM, while production line workers must work overtime until 9-10 PM almost every day, and they cannot rest on Saturdays. But office workers do not care and simply give us the notices." Lin showed me the order documents he received from the office, showing the handwriting on them: "See how careless the changes are made. They [office workers] did not even care to type it. Burdens to recalculate the numbers of ordered products are now totally on me."

It took me a while to understand why Lin and Wang blamed the office for the problems, which Song associated with sales representatives. Sales representatives, who sold kimchi and other Korean food products in their designated areas, created orders a week in advance. They made orders by filling out a spreadsheet template, where they marked the number of each product they would want for the next week's shipment. Two workers in the sales department in the Tiantian Food office received the orders through email. They added numbers to the ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) system and created order receipts (*dingdan*). The order receipts, basically the same as the spreadsheet document from sales representatives yet more concise and printable on a single page, were reviewed and signed by Choi L., who was still in charge of planning production schedules. The copies of signed order receipts—printed on carbon paper—

were circulated to various departments in the production line. Ideally, the production line could plan ahead for the next week's production by calculating how many products they needed to produce by when. In this ideal scenario, overtime work was still inevitable but could be reduced significantly, giving workers more time to rest, wash, and have fun.

Planning ahead was essential for producing kimchi since some processes could not be done in a shortened period of time. For example, kimchi production required 18-24 hours to brine cabbages, 4-6 hours to squeeze water from brined and washed cabbages, and 1-2 days to cool down the finished kimchi at the warehouse to slow down its fermentation (see Chapter 3). The time for transportation also had to be considered. A city like Guangzhou is 3,000 miles away from Tiantian Food in Qingdao, requiring three days to deliver kimchi from the factory to the sales representative's warehouse. In addition, since Tiantian Food transitioned from export to domestic sales, the company launched kimchi products in various packages. When they made kimchi for export, workers simply put 10kg of cabbage kimchi into a bulk plastic bag and packed it into a paper box. However, kimchi products for domestic sales were diverse in kind and sold in smaller packages, which necessitated more care, time, and workforce. Variety in kinds and sizes of products also meant that each product would be ordered in smaller numbers. For example, instead of ordering 100 boxes of 10kg bulk kimchi, a sales representative would order 50 boxes of 10kg cabbage kimchi, 30 boxes (300 packs) of 1kg radish kimchi, 10 boxes (200 packs) of 415g cabbage kimchi, and 10 boxes (200 packages) of 415g radish leaves kimchi. To fulfill the order, the head of the production line had to divide workers spatially and temporally to produce different types of kimchi, as there was not enough work for workers to spend their whole day focusing on a single type of product or process.

This was why last-minute changes in orders caused so much chaos and burden to the production line, as Song pointed out and Lin and Wang repeated in their own narratives. It was not easy for the company to keep extra stock of cabbage or radish, as fresh vegetables would go bad in a few days. If they had additional orders at the last minute and did not have materials to fulfill the orders, they needed to buy some from the wholesale market, paying more than what they would pay to contractors—merchants who sold vegetables at the pre-negotiated price to Tiantian Food. If sales representatives reduced the number of ordered products at the last minute, some materials and packages with printed manufacturing dates would go to waste. Suppose the additional orders were made only one or two days before the delivery day. In that case, some time-consuming processes would be compromised: spending less time brining, squeezing water from cabbages, and cooling down the finished kimchi. Any compromise in manufacturing processes to save time would potentially result in quality problems. For example, kimchi became too chewy (not enough brining), had too much water (not squeezing water enough), or fermented too fast (not enough cooling). Rushing to fulfill last-minute orders would also increase the chances for mistakes: packages not correctly sealed; foreign objects being found; seasoning not evenly distributed, and so on. Even if the production line managed to fulfill the orders without making mistakes or compromising the quality, workers' productivity decreased. They had to work overtime without taking proper rest and had to spend too much time transitioning from one work task to another, and sometimes had to work on a process without appropriate training or experience. The production cost would also increase, as the hourly rate for overtime work at night or on weekends (as mandated by law) is higher than during regular work hours.

Last-minute changes in orders, which people at Tiantian Food called *jiahuo* (adding more loads) or *buchongdingdan* (additional orders), did not go through the regular communication channel. Sales representatives called the office or sent WeChat (the Chinese online messaging app) messages to the office employees in the sales department. Sales representatives explained why they needed to change their orders and what they wanted to add to or remove from the orders, persuading sales department employees to accept the changes. The sales department then called Lin, the head of the production line, on the phone to ask whether the production line could handle the additional orders.² Lin checked their schedule and materials and responded to the sales department as to whether they could approve the proposed changes. For the reasons I explained earlier, any changes, big or small, were frowned upon by the production line. When there was not enough time, staffing, and materials to process the additional orders, the production line rejected the changes, and the sales department relayed the bad news to the sales representatives. If the sales representatives were persistent with their requests, it eventually became a ping-pong game between the production line and sales representatives through the sales department employees until Choi, Choi L., or (rarely) Song intervened.

Most of Tiantian Food's sales representatives were Korean-Chinese, born in Northeastern China (where the Korean Autonomous Prefecture is located), and later moved to other major cities for doing business. Although they spoke fluent Mandarin and got used to (Han-) Chinese cultures and customs, they still felt more comfortable speaking in Korean, eating Korean food (including kimchi), and socializing with other

² Even though the office was in the same building with the production line, meeting and talking in person was not ideal since it would require either office workers to go through a hygiene process or for production line workers to stop what they were doing, take off their smocks and boots, and put them on again to reenter the production line.

Koreans. They talked to Choi, Choi L., and Song on the phone or Wechat when their last-minute changes were not approved by the sales department (and the production line). Choi, Choi L., and Song were not only the owner family who made final decisions on company matters, but also Korean-Chinese who felt more comfortable speaking in Korean. When sales representatives talked with them in Korean, not like talking to sales department workers in Mandarin, they could better express their urgency to change the orders and better appeal to the intimate relationship they built for years. The sales representatives often called Choi “Tiantian mommy” and Song “Tiantian daddy.” They talked about their family matters and private lives on the phone or at meetings. They had dinners and drinks when Song and Choi visited the sales representatives’ cities, or the sales representatives came to Qingdao for business or the annual meetings. Some sales representatives joined the OKTA (Overseas Korean Traders’ Association) as Song became an executive board member in the organization, meeting Song and Choi at the OKTA meetings in China and South Korea. The intimacy between owners and sales representatives, conditioned by shared ethnic identity and language for their communication and interaction, provided leverage for sales representatives when they needed to make last-minute changes in their orders and had to go through Choi or Song for making them happen.

In most cases, the last-minute changes in orders were accepted, either approved by the production line or enforced by owners. Thus, the sales department in the office did not have complete control over whether the changes were approved or enforced. Their role was limited to mediating the communication between sales representatives and the production line. Lin and Wang had been with the company long enough to know the dynamics. Still, their complaints were directed toward the office and sales department since the last-minute changes accompanied different stakes for the office and

production line workers. For production line workers, the changes in orders would mean unplanned overtime work at night and on weekends. Instead of taking rest in their dormitory rooms, calling their families back at home, having a drink with coworkers, or getting a quality eight-hour sleep after a shower, laundry, and some house chores, production line workers would swallow cold soup noodle at the cafeteria and rush to bed to catch some sleep. Workers would not oppose overtime work entirely. They would not make enough money if they only worked for regular hours, and having too much free time would not help save money. But last-minute changes made it difficult to plan ahead for their after-work lives and negatively affected the morale of workers, who routinely had to work for a few more hours when they had expected a sweet rest in their bunk beds or some entertainment with friends.

Additional orders did not mean the same burden for office workers. Admittedly, processing additional orders was complicated and stressful. The sales department workers were jammed between the production line and sales representatives, relaying what the other side had to say, often for a few rounds. They had to deal with emotional responses from sales representatives and production line workers, feeling sorry for saying what they did not want to hear. It got more stressful when they could not resolve the disagreement and had to have it managed by the owners, which would make them feel powerless. Nevertheless, accepting additional orders did not involve any overtime work for them. Office workers, including the sales department workers, barely worked overtime. They went home precisely at 5 PM and took rest on weekends except on duty (once in a month or two). Their role ended at writing down a few words on the original order receipts or creating new tickets for additional orders. They did not have to experience or observe what the changes in numbers on the order receipts meant on the other side of the building. They did not need to wash hundreds more cabbages,

make more seasoning, spend another evening on the production floor, feeling exhausted and wanting to go home and rest. The different stakes of the additional orders were emphatically visualized when production line workers saw office workers going home at 5 PM as they headed back to the floor after dinner at the cafeteria; when they saw the lights in the office were turned off as they headed to the dormitory at 10 PM; and when they saw the photos of the office workers posted on social media, who were having fun with their family on weekends at fancy restaurants or parks. Because of the ways the additional orders were incorporated into office workers' and production line workers' lives and the ways the differences were visualized in the shared workplace (and online space), production line workers' complaints and frustration were channeled to the office workers rather than to sales representatives or owners.

Pitching for Changes: Same Problems, Different Perspectives

Song asked me to write the report in order to present it at the annual meeting with sales representatives in 2017. The report was meant to be seen and heard through audiovisual design rather than by being read. Thus, I did not write a lengthy report in words. Instead, I prepared PowerPoint presentation slides with infographics, tables, and concise words with bullet points. As I worked on the slides, Song came to my desk intermittently to check the slides or to ask me to bring my laptop to his office.

Ultimately, Song revised the slides during their preparation and presented them at the meeting. My role at the conference was limited to playing the slides and explaining the details of certain tables at Song's request.

The presentation slides started with a table on the last year's sales, showing a rapid increase in sales in most regions. However, the tone changed as the slides showed

statistical data on the cost of materials, wages and overtime work hours in the last year. The data indicated that the company, despite the growth in sales, faced challenges as costs increased and workers' productivity decreased. In turn, general solutions for the challenges were proposed: automation, the layoff of the production line workers, and planned production (*jihuashengchan*). Automation and layoffs were barely discussed in reference to the slides as these were the matters that did not relate to the sales representatives. Instead, planned production was contingent upon the collaboration between sales representatives and the company and was discussed in detail.

The slides further elaborated how sales representatives could cooperate with the company for planned production. First, sales representatives would submit their annual plan at the beginning of each year to plan ahead for the purchase of the materials and arrangement of the workers in the production line. Second, the sales representatives would confirm their orders one week in advance, which would give sales representatives opportunities to revise their sales plan based on actual demand at that moment. Third, additional orders would be accepted at least three days before shipping, but only when the ordered products were in stock at the time of order. This would mean that the production line would not produce any products per the last-minute requests. Fourth, the company would not print the region names on the packages and boxes, which had caused a great deal of inefficiency in the production process.

The fourth point might seem marginal, but its implication was significant both for the production line and sales representatives. Tiantian had about 20 sales representatives who sold kimchi in major Chinese cities and the surrounding areas. While sales representatives worked hard to corner the market in their cities and surrounding areas, they also aimed to expand their sales in far-away but logistically

well-connected cities. The company did not intervene into or otherwise encourage or discourage such efforts to expand their markets. However, it was strictly prohibited for sales representatives to intrude on other sales representatives' regions. Marking the region names on the packages and boxes was an effort to prevent such violations so that sales representatives could report the cases to the company. Nevertheless, marking regions also meant that the company did not have the flexibility to send products from one region to another without repackaging them. If products were not printed with the regional names, products with high demand could be produced in advance and stocked and sent to different regions on the basis of orders. So, if the company could roughly estimate the demand based on sales representatives' annual plan, they could manufacture some popular products even before the weekly orders were confirmed. Minor changes in weekly orders and additional orders could be more manageable if the company had some stock as well as flexibility to send them to different regions.

To sum up, the report for the annual meeting was not a simple description of my "fieldwork" for two weeks at the company. The voices from the production line and office workers—what they had to say about their experiences of handling additional orders—were only briefly reflected in the report. The physical and emotional difficulties in their work and lives were overshadowed by the increase in labor cost, the decrease in productivity, and potential problems in product quality. The misrepresentation or mistranslation of workers' experiences in the presentation was inevitable for several reasons. First, the report was intended to persuade sales representatives to establish their sales plans in advance and avoid last-minute changes as much as possible. For sales representatives, labor problems in the company mattered when they were materialized into the price or the quality problems of the products. Song emphasized that his solution to the problems would not increase in the cost (eventually the product

prices), which would concern the sales representatives most. Second, Song commissioned the writing of the report to me, heavily participated in preparing the slides, and ultimately presented them at the meeting. From Song's position, he was concerned most with the decrease in profit. He wanted to find a way to reduce the labor cost, which he analyzed as unnecessarily large. The solutions proposed in the report, rationalizing the order system between sales representatives and the production line, were designed to reduce the number of hours that production line workers had to work and thus ultimately reduce the number of workers the company had to hire.

The meeting was held in the company's conference room. After greetings from Song and Choi, Song started making his presentation with the slides. Song spoke in Korean since all the sales representatives were Korean-Chinese. So, a few office workers and staff of the sales representatives could only guess what Song talked about based on the slides, which were written in Mandarin.³ Song made a passionate speech on what challenges the company was currently facing and how the problems could be solved by rationalizing the order system. Sales representatives were busy taking photos of the slides, and some recorded Song's presentation with their mobile phones. I occasionally jumped in to explain the details of particular infographics, but most of the presentation was executed by Song—who performed much better than he had in rehearsals with me.

Right after his presentation, an office worker distributed papers to sales representatives—the form to fill in for their annual sales plans. But no one started filling out the form as Song and I had expected. Instead, some sales representatives raised

³ Song and I wrote words on slides in Mandarin not because we considered non-Korean speaking employees at the presentation. While most Korean-Chinese feel comfortable speaking in Korean, they find it more convenient reading and writing in Mandarin. I observed in several cases that Song and Choi took notes in Mandarin while speaking in Korean at meetings and decided that it would be better to use Mandarin in the slides.

their hands and made some comments. Oh, the sales representative in Shenyang, shared her point of view. Oh made an additional order when she had finally persuaded her client to buy her kimchi, but the client made an order just after she submitted her weekly order to Tiantian Food. If she had not made the additional order, her client would have had to wait for two weeks to get her kimchi, which would have jeopardized her longtime efforts to attract the client. Other sales representatives substantiated Oh's point. They made last-minute changes and additional orders to meet the fast-changing market conditions in their regions. Some restaurants or supermarkets made orders to the sales representatives when they had already run out of stock. In these cases, if they let their clients wait until next week or later, they would instead buy kimchi from other companies, and that would jeopardize the partnership that they had developed over the years. So, rather than losing their clients by letting them wait, sales representatives persuaded the company to change their orders.

One might ask why the sales representatives did not keep some stock to respond to such situations, but sales representatives had a good reason not to do that. Many clients, especially supermarkets, were highly sensitive to manufacturing dates on packages. They understood that kimchi is a fermented vegetable dish that could be preserved for months in the refrigerator and tastes better when properly fermented. Still, many consumers and store managers, especially non-Korean (Chinese) who were not familiar with kimchi, simply refused to buy or stock kimchi if it was produced a week ago, insisting on having freshly-made kimchi. This was another reason some sales representatives expressed concern over Song's new plan. If some products were manufactured before orders and stocked in the warehouse, their clients or consumers might reject the products simply because they were not "fresh" enough.

While sales representatives' responses were not entirely positive, mixed with some confusion and concerns, they generally agreed that some changes were necessary. However, sales representatives asked to be given some time to establish their annual plans and adjust to the new ordering system. Song agreed and decided to implement the new system in a few months, not immediately. Song moved on to different issues, and the meeting continued.

In conclusion, the new order system was ultimately not implemented that year. Soon after the meeting, a nationwide boycott against "Korean" products—triggered by diplomatic and military tensions between South Korea and China (See Chapter 2)—dealt a huge blow to sales representatives' businesses. The sudden decrease in sales in early 2017 made it almost impossible for them to project annual sales. Choi did not object but withheld abolishing the regional marking system. Choi later explained to me: there had been serious conflicts among sales representatives about violating designated sales areas, so she wanted to implement another system to prevent the violations before they abolished the regional markings. At the meeting in the following year, the problems regarding additional orders were again brought up, which meant nothing much changed since the last meeting. Lin and Wang complained to me: "Nothing can change in this company. We were not listened to. It was useless."

"Field Trip": Talking about Work while Going Home

As I explained earlier, I started my fieldwork at Tiantian Food only a couple of weeks before Chinese New Year. A few days before the holiday break, Song told me about production line workers' homecoming trips during the Chinese New Year holiday. Since most of the production line workers were from the same town in Henan Province,

the company rented one or two buses for their trips to their hometown and back to the company. In this way, Song said, workers did not need to worry about train tickets, which were highly competitive to buy during the holiday season, or transportation from the train station to their town. I wanted very badly to join their homecoming bus trips. I wanted to experience the temporal and spatial distances that workers had to live with. I wanted to talk with production line workers, who made kimchi move all over the country at an impressive speed and scale but stayed in the company dormitories throughout the year except the Chinese New Year break. I wanted to know how they came to work at Tiantian Food, which is located 1,000 miles away from their homes, and what they desired and dreamed about in relation to their work, their families, and their futures. I wanted to meet and talk with them outside of the company, in their homes, and on the move. I hoped to make a short documentary about them.

I could not join the homecoming trip in the first year. But before the Chinese New Year in the next year, I talked with people in the company about my plan, and the company approved and arranged my trip with the workers. I had consent forms signed by workers and started filming them in the production line, dormitory, and cafeteria. I was worried that workers might feel uncomfortable with my camera, but the camera granted me a form of relevance in their workplace. It was obvious that workers knew more about documentary than ethnography. Many workers had long been confused as to what I was doing in the company. But enabling me to wander while listening to or joining casual conversations, the camera turned me into a person with a definite purpose to be “here,” to talk to people, and to ask questions. The camera also stimulated workers to reflect on the value of their work and lives. During the shooting at the company, on the bus, and later in their hometown, workers often asked me: “Is this something worth filming?” The question was often in a joking or sarcastic tone.

Still, I saw some workers amused and excited by the fact that their work, lives, family, and hometown—which had barely gotten any public attention—became a part of the documentary.

On February 11, 2018, five days before the Chinese New Year Day, two buses arrived at Tiantian Food. Many workers did not sleep that night. The production line was extremely busy as they had to finish the last-minute orders, load products onto trucks that had waited for hours, and clean out the workshop before the break. Warehouse workers came back to their dormitory around 1 AM, but they were relieved that they still had time to pack their luggage. They recollected that they had to work until 4 AM and left for buses at 5 AM a few years ago. They vividly remembered the year since no one could wash before the trip, and the buses were filled with kimchi smell. Workers in other departments could go home or to the dormitory earlier, but they were exhausted after a month of enormous workload. They worked overtime every day and could not rest on Saturdays for six weeks. Some workers could not tolerate the workload and quit, which burdened the remaining workers even more. Thus, it was understandable that most of the workers slept right after they got on the buses at 5 AM. They pushed their bulky luggage under the buses, pulled back their seats, and started sleeping and snoring. For the first few hours on the bus, I was the only person who did not sleep (besides a driver who could not, of course), and I could only shoot landscapes beyond the windows and workers sleeping in the bus. I had expected that the trip back to their hometown would be festive, but I came to realize how naive and uninformed my expectations were.

Workers, one by one, woke up after a few hours of sleep in the bus. The bus became livelier as they started talking to each other, calling their family about where they were, and getting food and drink at rest stops. Some of them, who knew me and talked with

me at the company, started having conversations with me. Even as they looked forward to seeing their family and enjoying good food at home, they seemed still preoccupied by frustrating experiences at the company in the last few months. Without much asking, Xi and Hong, who worked at Tiantian Food for a few years and had leadership positions in the production line, started talking about their working and living conditions. I was sitting in front of them holding my camera but could not see nor shoot their faces as they started talking. More importantly, I was unsure if I should film them complaining about the company and worried if they would stop talking upon noticing the camera. I still turned on the camera, but it was more for recording. I just did my best to have a conversation with them, understand their complaints, and make eye contact through the gap between seats.

This sort of situation repeated itself throughout my stay in their hometown and the trip back to the company.⁴ I met workers at their homes over dinner and drinks, talked with them while playing with their young children, chatted as they did chores, and had long conversations sitting next to them on the bus again. They shared their views and experiences on their working and living conditions. My camera brought me to their hometown, and filming them was the reason why I was “there.” But I often turned off my camera or left it aside and just listened to them. There was nothing much I could add or say but to listen.

Many complaints I heard from the workers started with the cafeteria. Whether they lived in the dormitory or rented a house near the company, workers ate at the cafeteria. The cafeteria, which was annexed to the dormitory, provided breakfast (7 AM), lunch

⁴ The bus drivers—they needed two drivers to drive by turns—left the bus at a nearby city and went back their home in Qingdao by plane. Then, they came back by plane and drove to the town to pick up workers and drive them to the company.

(11:30 AM), and dinner (4:30 PM). When workers stayed for overtime work in the evenings, which happened most days, the cafeteria kitchen prepared night snacks, too. The cafeteria closed on Saturdays, but only if the workers had a day off as planned. Meals at the cafeteria were very simple: one *cai* and one *zhushi*. *Cai* in Mandarin means a dish or vegetable, and in the cafeteria, it is a dish with stir-fried vegetables, meat and various seasonings. *Zhushi* means carbohydrate dishes like steamed rice or a bun. Among 200 production line workers, most of them were from Henan Province where people had steamed bun (*mantou*) as *zhushi*. But a small number of workers were from Northeastern China where their *zhushi* was steamed rice. So, the cafeteria prepared one *cai* for all the workers but made two types of *zhushi*—steamed bun and rice—considering the regional difference. The problem with this policy, which seemed considerate of workers' cultural diversity, was related to how two kinds of *zhushi* were prepared differently. The main chef at the cafeteria kitchen was from Northeastern China. And while his rice did not receive any noticeable criticism, his steamed buns were poorly accepted by Henan workers. They complained that buns were either undercooked, over-fermented, left cold, or stingy in terms of portion—always “inedible” or “nothing to eat.” Workers told me how important *zhushi* was for them: while *cai* was for adding taste, *zhushi* was for providing enough energy for them to work long hours. They felt frustrated when their buns were inedible or not enough, thus having to buy some snacks to get by or to otherwise remain hungry for the entirety of their working hours. It did not mean that they did not have any problem with *cai*.

Workers lamented how badly dishes were cooked and how inconsiderate materials were chosen.⁵

All the complaints were oriented toward the subtle tension between Henan and Northeastern workers and how the company treated them differently. The cafeteria was under the control of Choi L., who had hired the chef from Northeastern China. Choi L. bought vegetables and meats for cafeteria meals and dealt with any issues regarding the cafeteria. Xi, a long-time service man in the company, explained his view: Choi L., like the chef, was also from the Northeast.⁶ When tension between Northeastern and Henan workers heightened, Choi L. took side of the chef and other Northeastern workers, dismissing the complaints from Henan workers. The influx of Northeastern workers started only a few years earlier, but Xi thought that they took important positions that were not given to Henan workers, even though Henan workers had worked at the company much longer. Many Henan workers like Xi felt that they were not trusted by the company and were treated as inferior to Korean-Chinese owners, office workers, and Northeastern workers. Every day at the cafeteria, the inedible or insufficient buns reminded them of such unfair treatment and the discrimination against them that they had to swallow.

Food was one of the important reasons that many Henan workers decided to move out of the dormitory. Some workers, especially if they came with their families and worked for a longer time, rented houses near the company. Not very far from the

⁵ Henan is an inland province where seafood is extremely hard to find, so Henan workers never acclimated to eating fish or other types of seafood even though seafood *cai* was provided for special occasions.

⁶ Northeastern China is adjacent to Korean peninsula, and Korean diaspora migrated and settled down in the region before and during the Japanese colonial era. Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, an administrative precinct self-governed by Korean-Chinese ethnic minority, is located in the Northeastern China, and the majority of Korean-Chinese are based in the Yanbian or nearby areas in the Northeastern.

company, 10 minutes walking or a couple of minutes by bike, there was a neighborhood with dozens of humble single houses for rent. These houses were tiny, poorly insulated, and not equipped with a bathtub or shower. The rent for these houses, combined with other maintenance expenses, easily exceeded the housing subsidy for workers who did not choose to live at the dormitory. Nevertheless, these houses were the only affordable and accessible option if workers decided to move out from the dormitory, and many did so. They did so because they wanted to have control over their lives. Although not for every meal every day, workers went back to their homes, quickly cooked or ate whatever they prepared in advance, and came back to work just before the working hours resumed. Many admitted that this was a costly arrangement, contradicting the rationale of leaving their hometown in Henan—saving money for their family and the future. Still, they felt that it was the only way they could avoid uncomfortable experiences of discrimination and make their lives away from home a little more acceptable.

Although not fully packed, many workers still chose to live in the dormitory. *Gongshigongzhu*—housing and food provided by the company for the domestic migrant workers—became less prominent than in the 1990s or the early 2000s, but it appealed to workers who left their hometown to earn some savings. For young people who came alone or with friends, the dormitory was a fun place to hang out with coworkers of similar ages. However, it did not mean that they were satisfied with their living conditions at the dormitory. They complained that they could not use personal heaters even though the new heating system did not work. The wireless internet did not work for a whole year, forcing workers to pay for expensive mobile plans or wander around the office for Wi-Fi signals. There were no shower facilities in the dormitory, even though workers had very little time to go to nearby public baths. Workers were

frustrated that the company made some efforts to improve their living conditions but that these did not result in actual improvement. The company invested a lot of money renovating the heating system and installing wireless internet, but they were not taken care of when they went out of order. The shower facility was shut down for a safety reason, but no solution was proposed regarding how workers could shower in the dormitory.⁷ Many workers felt that they were unfairly treated or did not have what they deserved in their work and lives, as the company's investment for their living conditions was not effectively translated into actual improvements. They were deserving and were cared for, but not enough to make any positive difference in their lives. Priority was always given to the office and products, workers complained. They observed how quickly machines in the production line were fixed while waiting the entire winter to get their heating system fixed. They were ordered to wipe out barely noticeable stains on product packages while they could not shower for days.

While listening to them during their homecoming trip, I felt extremely sorry for these workers. I was not sure if I deservedly earned their openness. I did not eat at the cafeteria. I stayed at the company, but not in the dormitory—instead, in a room with my own bathroom, kitchen (kind of) and a working wireless router (I took over Kim's office/bedroom when he moved out). I complained of too much heating. I did not work overtime or on weekends. I went back home when office workers did, and sometimes earlier with Song and Choi. I was a graduate student at an elite American university who would leave soon after I finished my fieldwork. From my perspective, workers'

⁷ The shower facilities within the dormitory were taken down after the boiler for hot water malfunctioned and almost injured a worker during the shower. Alternatively, the company distributed tickets for a nearby public bath so that workers could wash regularly. However, the arrangement was not convenient, and some workers even sold the tickets for extra cash rather than using them. Eventually, the company canceled the public bath program without having another alternative.

frank complaints were an invitation to their politics, whether workers intended that or not. I felt that I had to do something more than describe or reproduce what they openly shared with me. Yet I did not know how, even after I came back from the trip.

Reporting Problems: The Process of (Not) Solving Problems

I still did not know what to do with what I learned from the trip. One day, about a week after I came back, Song worked quite late in the office with Zhang, working on a new package design. I was staying in the office, which was partly attributed to my Korean sensibility of politeness—it felt awkward to go home before the boss did, partly because my family was still in Seoul, and I did not want to come home to an empty house. Song might have felt the same way as Choi had a dinner appointment with her friends that night. As Zhang went home, Song asked me to have dinner together. He wanted to have some *naengmyŏn* (Korean cold noodle) for dinner but could not think of a good place for the dish. Then, Song suggested going to his house to make some cold noodles there. As we got to his house, he went into the kitchen and made several dishes besides two bowls of cold noodles. And he opened a bottle of wine. It turned out that he wanted to have drinks. So, overtime work with Song led to a long night of drinks with him at his house. It was unexpected, but I got used to such unexpected developments during my fieldwork.

As usual, Song talked about many different issues—ranging from his childhood memories, friends in South Korea and China to ongoing projects—while I carefully listened to him, trying to remember as much as I could and thinking about how I could write a field note on this conversation. Then, our conversation ran into my trip to Henan. Mildly intoxicated with a few glasses of wine and beer, I thought it might be the

only chance to talk about what I learned from workers during the trip. So, I started talking, and Song carefully listened to me. I had no idea how Song would respond, but I went on anyway. As I finished, Song told me: we need to discuss it at our company. Please write a report on this topic so that I can bring it to a company meeting.

So, I did write a report. It was titled “A Few Suggestions on Improving the Working and Living Conditions of the Production Line Workers.” I could finish it fast as I kept thinking about the issue at that time, and more importantly, I wrote it in Korean. I did not write it in Mandarin, not just because it would take more time, but because I did not want it to be circulated wider than the managerial level. I did not worry that the report would be read by production line workers but was concerned with office workers who might have felt offended by the report. The report, reflecting workers’ views on how their living and working conditions were not improved over the years, pointed out some managerial problems, which could be interpreted (accurately) as targeting some office workers. I was spending most of my time at the office—my desk was moved to the main office, soon Zhang moved to the main office, too—and did not want to jeopardize my relationship with them over this report. So, even if the report was shared with office workers, I wanted it to be filtered through Song or Choi.

As I finished the 1,500-word report in Korean, I sent it to Song and Choi through their personal emails and Wechat messages. They replied that they received the file and appreciated my input. Then, I did not hear anything for two weeks. It became again very busy at Tiantian Food. The production line had to process a great number of orders as the sales representative did not have any stock after the Chinese New Year break. The company would hold another annual meeting with sales representatives soon. I assumed that the report was being forgotten, left buried in Song and Choi’s email inboxes. Song briefly mentioned my report in a meeting, but I had to wait another

month until the report was formally discussed in a company meeting. It took some time, but the report was not forgotten and finally discussed.

When Song called for a meeting, he brought Choi L., the cafeteria chef, and other office workers to the meeting. Song introduced my report, asking me to present it in Mandarin. Suddenly, I had to confront the managerial staff in person and advocate the voices of the production line workers. The buffer, which I thought I created as I wrote the report in Korean and sent it to Song and Choi, suddenly disappeared. And I had to tell people what they might not have wanted to hear, especially in front of Song and Choi. So, as I translated and presented my report in the meeting, I added: “what I am reporting here are problems from the workers’ points of view. Their views might have been partial and are not always correct. I simply want us to think about their experiences from their perspectives.” Song was also worried about the backlash from office workers, so warned: “before we have this conversation, please do not ascribe all the problems to the “quality (*suzhi*)” of the workers. See how people in the city government or airport behave. High-status or wealthy people can act uncivil, causing chaos and disruption. We are not here to blame someone for problems. Instead, we should find solutions for the existing problems.”

With these trigger warnings, I made a brief oral presentation of the report, laying out a few problems raised by workers regarding the cafeteria, dormitory, and their wage system. I also recommended a few solutions to each issue, which I thought would not require much investment to handle workers’ complaints and potentially improve their productivity. As I finished my presentation, the cafeteria chef responded quite fiercely. He felt he was unfairly and falsely accused by Henan workers. He simply denied that the problems existed, and said that workers made up false claims since they were not on good terms with him, because he came from a different region. Soon Choi

L., who was in charge of all the issues I mentioned in the report, intervened. She said that while she acknowledged the chef's contribution to the company for years, the chef should learn how to accept criticisms rather than simply deny them. Then, she moved on to the problems in general. She started to explain what measures had been taken previously for the issues I mentioned and how and why they had failed. She did not say that the workers were bad-mannered. Instead, she pointed out that there was no proper management system for production line workers at the cafeteria and dormitory, talking in length about how certain workers took too many buns and left nothing for other workers. Soon, the conversation moved on to how the company could better discipline workers at the dormitory and cafeteria. Song suggested a few solutions, such as introducing a prepaid card system so that workers would pay for what they chose to eat and designating a few workers to supervise other workers at the dormitory and cafeteria. Song concluded the meeting without coming to terms with any solution, only suggesting that the office develop a management system plan for workers at the cafeteria and dormitory.

Overall, my report and the following meeting made a few, although not significant, changes in the company. Mechanics in the company completed the repairs on the heating system and Wifi network in the dormitory after the meeting. The office killed the prepaid card system idea, and Song did not follow up. A few workers were assigned to supervise the order at the cafeteria, but it did not make a huge impact. The chef was not replaced, and workers from Henan still did not like his food. Song followed up on the shower facility issue for months. However, he could not find a safe and economical solution to the problem. Choi initiated the wage system reforms, but it was unclear how much the new system would resolve workers' complaints when Choi

L., who calculated workers' wages, dismissed their complaints as inaccurately addressed.

Reordering Orders in the Commodity Supply Chain

In this chapter, I present how the owners, managers, workers, and sales representatives of Tiantian Food see problems in their logistical coordination, communication, and work environments. Song saw the increased production costs from the company's annual financial statement. Lin and Wang, the production line managers, saw the last-minute changes in the order receipts in handwriting. Sales representatives found limited flexibility in accommodating clients' orders when talking with the sales department employees. Production line workers like Xi and Hong felt, tasted, and lived with the lack of care for their working and living environments. Choi L. saw a lack of discipline and supervision in the cafeteria and dormitory.

Their diagnoses of problems were always shaped by the solutions they envisioned. Song wanted to reduce production costs by reforming the ordering system. Lin and Wang wanted the office workers to "care" for the production line before they approved last-minute changes in the orders. Sales representatives wanted the new ordering system not to compromise their capacity to accommodate market demand in time. Xi and Hong wanted the owners to follow up on the investment made to improve their working and living conditions. Choi L. wanted better supervision to keep orders in the cafeteria and dormitory, which would eventually improve the workers' living conditions.

Their views on problems and solutions in the production and distribution of kimchi at Tiantian Food are premised upon how they understood the nature of social and

power relationships in and beyond the company. As an owner of the company, Song saw the production line workers as replaceable units of the production force. In his understanding of the company's operation, the workers were measured in terms of their productivity, how efficiently they could make kimchi products with given materials and conditions. Song barely went into the production line, nor did he interact with the production line workers. He was not interested in making any gestures showing his "care" for the workers. Instead, Song believed in systematic changes in the production and distribution of kimchi to satisfy everyone—sales representatives, production line workers, and him. He wanted to *redesign* the material conditions, communicative modes, and logistical network in which kimchi products were made and distributed. In this way, he hoped to implement a way that the interests of sales representatives would not conflict with those of his company and production line workers, and that would improve the workers' living and working conditions as well as their productivity.

For Lin and Wang, who managed the production line, the problem lay in the lack of understanding. They lamented that the office workers did not know how things worked on the production line, while the decisions made in the office had a massive impact on their side. Even though the production line workers and office workers worked under the same roof, they were separated spatially and temporally. They came to work, ate at the cafeteria, and went home at different times. There was very little in-person interaction between production line workers and office workers during the work since the hygiene protocols in the production line made it very hard for workers to enter or exit the production line floor. Most importantly, office workers could go home and spend weekends with their families even when production line workers had to work overtime because of the additional orders that the office approved. Lin and Wang

hoped that Song could push through his reform but were not very optimistic. They worked at Tiantian Food long enough to have seen similar plans fall short or create new problems. Instead, they thought that the office workers could do things differently once they knew about—or even better, experienced—the physical and emotional tolls created by last-minute changes to order receipts.

The office workers did not think the problems could be solved with better communication or mutual understanding. They communicated with the production line managers before they responded to sales representatives' requests. They asked about the production line's situation when authorizing the last-minute changes. From their viewpoints, the problem lay in the fact that the sales representatives detoured the official communication procedures and talked directly with the owners in Korean. The linguistic barrier excluded them from particular communication and decision-making processes in the company, even when they were in charge of the functions. Sales representatives knew that their requests for last-minute changes burdened the company. However, they did not think that they had other options. They would not beat back competition from rival kimchi companies if they could not accommodate the last-minute orders from their clients in time. The last-minute changes were necessary to keep up with the fast-changing market conditions.

Whoever was blamed for the last-minute changes in the orders, it was the production line workers who carried the burden. They were the ones who worked late at night and on weekends, being deprived of time to call their family, take some good rest, or go out with coworkers for dinners or drinks. Workers were aware that the problems were systematic. They saw young and bright workers quit the company in search of better conditions and rewards, which forced the remaining (older) workers to work longer and harder. However, workers were not committed to analyzing the

problems or pitching solutions for them as their managers or bosses did. Instead, they were invested in discussing and fighting regional discriminations that made their work and lives at the company more challenging. They interpreted the problems in their living and working arrangement as articulations of regional differences (and differentiation). Workers from Henan felt that they were mistreated by office workers from Qingdao and owners from the Northeast, who ignored suggestions and complaints from them while taking care of employees from their own native regions or hometowns.

Thus, people at Tiantian Food pointed out disjunctures in social orders as sources of problems at the company—whether these were spatiotemporal separations that hindered mutual understanding, linguistic barriers that excluded some employees from decision-making processes, or regional differences that reinforced misunderstanding and hostility toward one another. These disjunctures not only caused physical and emotional pain to people but also negatively affected kimchi products' qualities and distribution—as well as the company's profits.

So, whether they found problems in the deteriorating quality of lives, products, or diminishing profits, they wanted to *reorder* the social orders in which people worked together to produce and distribute Korean kimchi. For example, Song believed that he could solve some problems by implementing systematic changes in logistical coordination, communication, and work environments. As an owner, he initiated some changes within the company, discussed solutions with employees, and proposed his plans to sales representatives. However, it was not just Song who attempted to reorder the social orders of the supply chain. Other employees might not have visions or power to initiate systematic changes as Song did, but they found ways to reorder the social orders of supply chains. Lin and Wang often tried showing the chaos in the production

line to the office workers, hoping that they could better understand the material consequences of last-minute changes to the documents. Sales representatives called Choi and Song when their requests were denied by the sales department, making sure that the company could keep up with the market conditions.

Workers and managers in the production line shared their thoughts and experiences with me, who stayed in their workplace and hometown for “fieldwork” and a “field trip.” Although not very optimistic, they hoped that this unusual arrangement could deliver their complaints to the office and bosses, whom they thought could reorder the current orders—material, social, and logistical coordination in the supply chain—for them. My “reports” based on the “fieldwork” and “field trip” were circulated in the opposite direction from how the orders—both orders as commands and orders as products to be shipped—moved. The reports invited the readers to see the logistical, communicative, and labor arrangements in the supply chain from different perspectives, which were hindered by various disjunctures in the social relations.

Not surprisingly, the reports did not convince the readers to make fundamental changes in the supply chain. Instead, how the reports were accepted articulated the resilient political structures in the supply chain of Korean kimchi, in which linguistic, regional, and spatiotemporal separations were reproduced to expedite capitalist circulation. These disjunctures, which were criticized as the roots of the “problems,” conditioned the overexploitation of production line workers to manufacture the commodities at the pace “the market” wanted. Eventually, the problems in ordering things were not the same as those in ordering people; at least they did not share the same solutions.

Conclusion

Envisioning Futures and Nations' Times

My Son

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, I paused my fieldwork because my child was born. He was one of many surprises—and definitely the most surprising one—I faced during my fieldwork in China. My wife and I were suddenly burdened with important decisions to make. How does my wife, who does not speak any Mandarin, see an obstetrician-gynecologist for regular check-ups in Qingdao? Should she give birth in China, South Korea, or the United States? How and where would we take care of our baby while maintaining our visa status in China and registration at the university in the United States? For weeks, we did research online, asked around with our friends, and simulated all the possible trajectories. We concluded that it would be best for us to go back to Chicago for a while, give birth to our child, raise him for a couple of months until he was ready for a flight, and come back to Qingdao together so that I could resume my fieldwork. It was the only arrangement that would enable our family to stay together throughout the course; my wife to take a maternity leave as a graduate

student; and some of our family members to stay with us to help take care of our newborn, thereby securing us some time to prepare a place to stay in Qingdao afterwards. Thankfully, Song and Choi understood our situation and agreed to have me back once I returned from my "parental leave" from fieldwork.

When we—now my wife, our son, and I—came back to Qingdao to resume my fieldwork at Tiantian Food, we asked Song and Choi a big favor. We had noticed there was an empty room in the building that used to be Song and Choi's residence. The room was initially made for Song and Choi's daughter, who now went to college in South Korea. The room was tidy, had an attached bathroom, and most of all was only 100 feet away from Tiantian Food's office. I could save time commuting and go back to our room whenever my wife or son needed help. Thankfully, Song and Choi rented us the room during the second part of my fieldwork, and my family stayed at Tiantian Food the entire time—as Song and Choi's family had done before they purchased and moved to a mansion, or as the production line workers were doing at the dormitory attached to the factory.

My housing arrangement was intended to shorten the distance between work and home so I could spend more time with our newborn and my wife while I did my fieldwork. However, I did not realize how much my housing arrangement would also change my relationship with interlocutors. My wife sometimes needed a break from parenting, so I often took my son to the office for ten to twenty minutes. Without having been asked, office workers volunteered to play with him at their desks. Soon it became a daily routine that I took him to the office, and the office workers, who were married women with kids, held or played with him in turn.

Choi especially enjoyed her turn with my son. She often asked me if I could bring him to the office so that she could enjoy a hug from him. She showed him the flowers

behind her desk, looked into the small pot of goldfish with him, and would even take him on short strolls. My son also cherished spending time with Choi. He could not yet speak for himself, but barely cried or fussed in her arms.

My son's presence in the office opened up some of my office colleagues to talk about their families. As they held my son in their arms, they shared stories about their kids, what they did during the weekends, and what they planned for their kids' education. I spent a lot of time talking with Choi about her children and family. She shared stories of why she left her daughter with her mother and looked for opportunities in Tianjin; how she brought her mother and children to Qingdao as her business took off; why she wanted her daughter to go to high school and college in South Korea; and why she wanted her son, who was working in the United States, to come back and join the company. Sometimes our conversations turned very emotional—suffice it to say that every family has a skeleton in the cupboard.

After we came back to Chicago again, I regularly checked in with Choi and Song. The time difference made it challenging for us to call each other, but I sent messages to give updates on my dissertation and, more importantly, about my son. At least once or twice a month, I sent them a few photos and videos of him so that Song and Choi could see how much he had grown. We chatted about how my son mingled well with *foreign kids* (they meant non-Koreans), how he appreciated Korean food, and how he was learning to speak Korean. Choi and Song also gave me updates on their company's new exciting projects, which they looked forward to showing me on my future visit to Qingdao.

Office employees at Tiantian Food also got in touch with me, for checking in but primarily for asking for some "favors." Especially when both Song and Choi were away on business trips, they needed someone to translate emails from South Korean clients or

government officials. A few unfinished projects needed my further involvement, such as applying for the certificates from the South Korean FDA. I enjoyed checking in with these workers, whom I used to see almost every day at Tiantian Food, and being reminded of how we had worked together.

One day, a designer at Tiantian Food contacted me through WeChat, a Chinese messaging platform. She was working on a new company brochure and I was helping her double-check its English and Korean translations. But this time, she did not contact me for translation help. She instead asked if I could send her a photo of my son. When Choi had reviewed the new company brochure before printing, she had suggested adding an image of a child under the corporate philosophy slogan: "Joyfulness, Beautiful Smiles, and Beautiful Life." Choi had said that nothing describes the motto better than a photo of my son, whom she dearly missed. I was happy to send a few pictures to the designer. Soon the designer sent me the file of Tiantian Food's pamphlet, where my son's smiling face was featured on the page of corporate philosophy.

About two years later, the designer contacted me again. She was revising the pamphlet, as the company needed new brochures again. She asked if I could send her recent photos of my son, telling me: *the company grows, your son grows too, and his photo in the pamphlet needs an update!* I realized how small my son was in the previous picture and sent her a few recent photos of him. I am looking forward to seeing him in the new pamphlet.

Tiantian Food in Yanji

Starting as an export-oriented manufacturing company, Tiantian Food has grown over the years. One of the crucial changes was the second plant. During the second part

of my fieldwork, Song was spending most of his time in Yanji to build their second plant. Since our original meeting in 2017, this idea had been in the back of his mind. He negotiated with the local government to secure land for the plant, persuaded entrepreneurs in China and South Korea to invest in his business plan, and met people in the South Korean food industry for inventing new products. Even when he was in Qingdao, he mostly stayed at home to draw floor plans for the new plant.

The second plant is located at the outskirts of Yanji, the capital of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture. Tiantian Food's sales in Yanji have significantly exceeded the sales in other major cities and regions, even though its population is much smaller than that of Beijing or Shanghai. The excellent sales record in Yanji cannot be simply explained by the fact that most of the population in Yanji is "kimchi-eating" Korean-Chinese. Earning a good amount of money from their blue-collar jobs in South Korea, many Korean-Chinese come back and open Korean restaurants, supermarkets, or small shops in Yanji. They also eat and drink outside a lot, spending "South Korean" money in their hometown. The rapid development of consumer markets in Yanji, conditioned by the constant flow of migrant income from South Korea, facilitated the impressive success of Tiantian Food in Yanji—even though Yanji is almost 1,500 miles away from Qingdao. By establishing the second plant in Yanji, the company saved transportation time and costs when supplying kimchi and other Korean food products to their most significant market in China.

Also, as I explained in the introduction, the factory in Qingdao was designed for manufacturing a single type of kimchi efficiently. While Tiantian Food successfully diversified its production line for domestic sales, there was a clear limit to the extent to which Qingdao's production line could be repurposed. Song saw the opportunity to

expand the company's manufacturing capacity by building another plant, which is now designed for manufacturing not just kimchi but also various Korean products.

Other reasons and plans were also under consideration. For example, Song was excited about the possibility of hiring North Korean production line workers. Although not through official channels, the North Korean government "dispatches" their people to foreign countries so that they can earn "foreign currency" for the country (Alterburn 2018). There were already a few companies in Northeast China that had successfully hired North Korean workers. Song thought that North Korean workers would be perfect for the second plant in Yanji: they would be paid much less than Chinese workers but would understand Korean food products better. In addition, Song wanted to build a museum inside the plant where local people and tourists could learn about the history and culture of kimchi. He wanted the museum to offer hands-on experiences of making kimchi in traditional ways so that visitors could better appreciate kimchi and the Korean culture behind it.

Admittedly, the expansion involved a lot of risks and challenges—such as figuring out the logistics of supply and distribution. Tiantian Food typically sourced key ingredients such as pepper powder from local suppliers in Qingdao. Therefore, they needed to decide whether to use the same ingredients and get them shipped from Qingdao to Yanji or find alternative suppliers near the second plant. The second plant is located closer to major cities in Northeast China but far away from Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other southern cities. Thus, they needed to figure out how the two plants would divide the region, handle online orders, and support one another when facing unexpected disruptions. Lastly, the second plant would need experienced workers in both the office and the production line, creating a potential need for some of the Qingdao workers to relocate to Yanji. Some workers asked me in person if I knew

anything about who would move or stay (I did not), showing their excitement or concern for their future at Tiantian Food.

Somewhere Else

Hong was a young woman in her early thirties and in charge of a small team called *moliaoban*, whose task was to add seasoning into layers of napa cabbages. *Moliao* was deemed the most important and technical process among all the manufacturing processes, and Hong was the best. She could do twice as many tasks as other workers would do, while also monitoring other workers and fixing their work if necessary. Hong was extremely friendly and chatty as well: she seemed to never stop talking, and even on the very loud production line floor, her high-pitched voice traveled exceptionally well. Hong had a lot to say about her family, work, and future, which she often shared with me through WeChat, even after my fieldwork at Tiantian Food was over.

Hong spent most of her twenties at Tiantian Food. She was married and left her young son with her mother in her hometown, where she went back only once a year. She stayed at the company dormitory, saving most of her income for her child and family. Nevertheless, she was not fully satisfied with herself. She was frustrated with the inefficiency in the production line: many employees were too old to work at a faster pace, and workers had to spend too much time sorting out bad materials. She complained that most workers, including team leaders like her, did not speak up or act upon various problems in the production line. She was ready to bear more responsibility but was unsure if she could "climb up the ladder" in this company.

So, she tinkered with alternative options. For two years, she left Tiantian Food and worked at an electronics company. It did not work out for her, so she quietly rejoined Tiantian Food. For some periods, she tried online direct sales of cosmetic products. Every night after work, she posted a few photos or videos of her sampling the cosmetics, selling the products to her (online) friends. She did not tell me how it worked, but she soon stopped posting her cosmetic photos on WeChat, so I assume it did not go well. She talked about opening a small shop in her hometown or running her own business. She liked her work at Tiantian Food, admired Choi for being a successful businesswoman, and genuinely wanted Tiantian Food to succeed. But at the same time, she did not wish to *moliao* for her whole life. One day, she wanted to become a manager (*jingli*) or boss (*laoban*) like Choi.

Right after the Chinese New Year in 2020, Hong decided not to go back to Tiantian Food. She sent me a very long message about why she decided to quit the job. She thought there were too many managerial problems in the production line that might jeopardize the company's future. The upper managers in the production line did not appreciate her efforts to rectify the issues, for which Hong suffered too much stress. She also found another opportunity: her aunt was running a business in Xinjiang, and asked Hong to quit Tiantian Food and join her business, which Hong finally agreed to do. Hong said she would make more money than she would do in Tiantian Food. Also, Hong's son reached the age to go to elementary school, and she was excited to stay with him and send him to a top-level public school in Xinjiang.

Zeng was a flamboyant man in his twenties, working in the warehouse. He had his parents also working at the company. However, they rented a house nearby the factory, while he stayed at the dormitory, and only went to his parents' house when he missed

their food. Most of the time, Zeng enjoyed having fun with coworkers of a similar age. He liked food (especially that of his hometown), cigarettes, and strong Chinese liquor (*baijiu*). He dated a young girl who also worked at Tiantian Food and went out for late-night drinks and dinner with his friends. He did not have a car or bike but always talked about his friends' awesome bikes, often taking selfies on his friends' bikes and posting them on WeChat.

Zeng wanted to work at Tiantian Food for just three years. He was not entirely happy with the wage he earned, but thought he could learn a lot from the managers in the production line. After three years, he planned to come back to his hometown and open a small restaurant. He knew a lot about food, enjoyed cooking, and also thought he should take care of his family at home. His grandparents still resided in the hometown, and his sister-in-law and niece needed someone to care for them since his older brother tragically passed away at work. He even considered marrying the woman his parents "introduced," rather than his girlfriend, as he felt the pressure as now the only son in the family.

I met Zeng again when I visited the sales representative in Xi'an. Zeng had quit Tiantian Food and gone back to his hometown, which was not so far from Xi'an. When I saw him at Xi'an, he looked pale and emaciated. He barely smoked, which ironically worried me. I asked him what happened, and he showed me the scar on his arm. One night at Tiantian Food, he went out for a drink with a few coworkers after work. Heavily intoxicated, he suddenly punched a window of the company dormitory. His coworkers told him that he did, but he had no memory of whether, why, and how he did. A friend called 911, and he was sent to a nearby hospital. The injury was too serious to be treated there, so he was sent to a larger hospital in Qingdao downtown. But even the doctors at the downtown hospital could not do any surgery because he

was too drunk. He had a surgery to stitch arteries and nerves a day after, which took nine hours and three blood bags. Zeng was hospitalized for a month, which cost his family almost 100,000 yuan (13,000 USD). He earned about 50,000 yuan (6,500 USD) a year at Tiantian Food, so all of his earnings for the last two years disappeared in one drunken night. He could not get any reimbursement from the company or the government since the injury was self-inflicted.

Zeng's arm never fully recovered after the surgery. The doctor said it would take almost two years, but Zeng was not so sure about it. Zeng's right arm was shaky when we talked. He could not handle any heavy stuff, so he could not work at the warehouse anymore. The production line manager offered him a job with light duties, but Zeng thought he would do better in his hometown. Zeng found a job as a line cook at his friend's hot pot restaurant in his hometown. He earned much less than he had at Tiantian Food, but the workload at a not-so-busy restaurant suited his condition. He applied for the social benefits for the disabled, hoping that the benefits would help him and his family financially. So, his three-year plan at Tiantian Food was abruptly scrapped by the injury, as was his dream of opening his own restaurant. However, he returned to his hometown, staying close to his family while working as a cook. Also, he bought himself a small scooter.

Nations' Times

In this dissertation, I have discussed how people in the Chinese kimchi industry understand and act upon the formulation of commodity value, which conditions and is conditioned by the nationalist imaginaries of "Korea." I have examined the nationalist, capitalist, and (post)colonial contexts in which the implication of Korea is redefined,

questioned, and diversified (Chapter 1). I have described how the unusual conditions of international scandal articulate Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs' postnational visions to reach both "Korean" and "Chinese" markets, which were challenged by territorial-nationalist imaginaries of geopolitical orders amplified by media (mis)representations (Chapter 2). I have analyzed how various expectations regarding "Korean" qualities are aesthetically, semiotically, and logistically registered in the designing processes. By showcasing various efforts to translate "Korean" qualities into added value for kimchi products, I have explained how people in the Chinese kimchi industry perceive and act upon the coproduction of commodity value and nationalist imaginaries (Chapter 3). I have also explored how the endeavors to create "Korean" qualities and value reconfigure the social and political relations in the supply chain (Chapter 4).

The semiotic, material, and logistical making of Korean kimchi accompanies the reconfiguration of distance. Distance is not simply a physical impediment for capitalist circulation (Marx 1992). Instead, distance is remade as Korea is reimagined as the quality of commodities, the identity of people, and the character of a place outside South (or North) Korea (Chapter 1). Distance is an important condition for the formulation of commodity value, which needs to be remembered and emphasized. The Chinese kimchi manufacturers and distributors described in this dissertation attempt to bring Korea closer to consumers in China while reaffirming the distance they overcome to create added value to the products (Chapter 2 and 3). Distance is remade, redefined, and retold to condition the social relations in the commodity supply chain, shaping the hierarchy and inequalities among people who compose it (Chapter 4).

Imaginaries of "Korea" are also entangled with the reformulation of time. Claims to Korean identities of things, people, and places are premised upon their historical connections with "Korea" in the past (Chapter 1). Kimchi manufacturers and

distributors develop business strategies based on the reflection upon past experiences and speculation on future changes (Chapter 3). While they attempt to keep their current footing in "Korean" markets, they constantly seek opportunities in the "Chinese" markets where they find hope for the future (Chapter 2). People perceive, imagine, and create "Korea," projecting their imaginaries of place and time.

The allure of "Korea" in these Chinese markets is not simply that products from (South) Korea or related to Korea have better qualities. Instead, Korean products are positively received and evaluated because they embody the qualities and styles that many Chinese consumers envision as those of a better future. At least, that is what many South Korean and Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs expected before the boycotts (Chapter 2). For them, China is Korea's past and the future at the same time. China is the past of Korea in that the Chinese economy has not matured enough, reminding them of the economic conditions of South Korea in decades (or years) ago. They expect that the Chinese economy will go through similar changes as the South Korean economy did, such as the increase in middle-class consumers willing to pay more for better quality commodities and convenient services. That is why many South Korean and Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs seek opportunities to sell products that became popular in South Korea or apply marketing strategies that achieved success in the South Korean markets (Chapter 3). By producing and selling Korean kimchi in China, the entrepreneurs attempt to profit, not only from overcoming the distance between Korea and China, but also from making the qualities of a better future available now in China.

At the same time, the entrepreneurs find the future of their "Korean" businesses in China. They find more market opportunities and potentialities for growth that are no longer available in the saturated Korean markets (Chapter 1 and 2). They expect "at some point" they will make more money in China, where their commitment to

producing Korean qualities is appreciated and positively evaluated, instead of relying on the demand and consumer power in South Korea, where their products are devalued as inferior and inauthentic "Made in China" (Introduction). For them, China is not just another emerging market. Rather, China is an *enormous* market where a billion consumers buy and consume various products. The size of Chinese consumer markets and the rapid pace of their growth appeal to entrepreneurs in China and beyond, facilitating their speculative investment based not on the current market status in China but on what "China" will eventually become.

It is not only South Korean and Korean-Chinese entrepreneurs who imagine and act upon China's bright future. Since Xi Jinping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, he has promoted the "Chinese Dream (*zhongguomeng*)" as the core political ideology of his leadership. Xi's Chinese Dream proposes to achieve *xiaokang*, the modest material well-being of its people, by 2020 and make China one of the strongest and wealthiest countries in the world by 2049, the hundredth year of the People's Republic of China's establishment (Leng 2013). The vision of the Chinese Dream is further articulated in the "Made in China 2025" (*zhongguozhizao 2025*) project. The Made in China 2025 project aims to make China a manufacturing powerhouse like Germany by 2025. Through the successful restructuring of Chinese manufacturing industries, the project intends to rebrand China as a country that "creates" (*chuangzao*, not just manufactures, *zhizao*) quality products with its own brands (Zhou 2015). Political campaigns under Xi's leadership emphasize that China has been and will be on the right path to recover its position as an economic, political, and military superpower in the world. While the campaigns acknowledge the gaps between China and other developed countries, their timelines envision that China will "soon" become a

developed country—not just another developed country, but an *enormously* strong and rich one.

This political ideology of China's growth reverberates with Chinese consumers' experiences in the markets. In recent years, Chinese consumers have observed that European and North American corporations make all sorts of compromises to gain access to the Chinese markets (Horowitz 2018). Those companies launch products that specifically targeted Chinese consumers. They make exceptions to their policies, jeopardizing users' privacy and allowing the Chinese government to supervise users' online activities. Their CEOs and advertisement models make public apologies whenever they comment on politically sensitive issues such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Dalai Lama. By learning how much "China" is desired and feared by leading companies based in developed countries, Chinese consumers perceive that their country is not so far from being a strong and prosperous country, or already is. Such understanding is often materialized into mass movements as Chinese consumers attempt to use their consumer power to pressure other nations and companies (Chapter 2). Experiencing the success of their mass movements, such as the closure of businesses, public apologies, or requested changes in business practices, reinforces their perception of a powerful China while strengthening Chinese people's identification with their nation.

Nations' times—imaginaries of nations' pasts, presents, and futures—are folded into companies' and people's times. People carefully observe, read, and imagine where nations are heading; plan where they will be, with whom, and how; and calibrate and remake distances. In their efforts to synchronize their personal times with companies' or nations', people remake the distances from their family and hometowns, and companies recalibrate the distances from their markets, partners, and workers.

People aspire to grow *with* companies, and companies want to grow *with* nations. Reading from an optimistic blueprint, Song and Choi envision that their company will grow along with their family, hometown, and nation, metaphorically representing this growth through my son's photos in the company pamphlets. Nevertheless, not everyone or every company does. As Zeng did, people face unexpected situations that would force them to scrap their plans. As Hong did, people fear that they might be stuck with a company that might not grow further, or in other ways hinder their personal growth. They look for alternative places to grow, where they can expect their and their family's bright future. Still, people resiliently find ways to make a living, take care of family, and achieve small and big dreams—keeping up with rapidly growing "China" in their own fashion. People imagine and evaluate what is happening in companies and nations in order to grow *with* them, but not without tensions, instability, and uncertainties.

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