HA-JOON CHANG

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The World in 17 Dishes

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Ha-Joon Chang teaches economics at SOAS University of London, and is one of the world's leading economists. His books include *Economics: The User's Guide*, *Bad Samaritans* and *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism*, which was a No.1 bestseller.

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To Hee-Jeong, Yuna and Jin-Gyu

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Introduction: Garlic

Manul chang-achi (pickled garlic)
(Korean – my mother's recipe)
Heads of garlic, pickled in soy sauce, rice vinegar and sugar

At the dawn of time, humans suffered in chaos and ignorance (so not much has changed, then). Taking pity on them, Hwanoong, a prince of the Heavenly Kingdom, came down to Earth to visit where Korea is today and established the City of God. Within the city he elevated the human race, giving them laws as well as knowledge about agriculture, medicine and the arts.

Hwanoong was one day approached by a bear and a tiger. They had seen what he had done and, noting the way the world worked now, wanted to switch and become human. He promised them that they would each morph into human form if they went into a cave, avoided sunlight and ate only *manul* (garlic) and *ssook** – for a hundred days. The animals decided to follow the instruction and entered a deep cave.

After only a few days, the tiger rebelled. 'This is ridiculous. I can't live on some stinky bulbs and bitter leaves. I'm quitting,' he said – and swept out of the cave. The bear stuck with the diet and, after the one hundred days, became a beautiful woman, Woong-nyeo (literally Bear-Woman). Woong-nyeo later married Hwanoong and had a son, who became the first king of Korea, Dan-Goon.

⋆

* This is the slightly bitter, herby East Asian wild plant known as 'Korean mugworts' (*Artemisia princeps*).

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My nation, Korea, was literally founded on garlic – and it shows. Check out our diet: Korean Fried Chicken* is a veritable festival of garlic: made with batter studded with chopped garlic, often then slathered in sweet, fiery chilli sauce, plus yet more garlic. Some Koreans find the amount of chopped garlic in the marinade for *bul-gogi* (literally meaning 'fire meat') – thinly sliced flame-grilled beef – insufficient. Their solution? Eat it with raw garlic cloves or grilled slices of garlic. A very popular pickle, *manul chang-achi*, consists of heads of garlic, pickled in *ganjang* (soy sauce), rice vinegar and sugar. Garlic leaves and garlic shoots also get pickled the same way. We eat garlic shoots fried, often with fried dried shrimps; or blanched and dressed in sweetish chilli-based dressing. And then there is our national dish, *kimchi* – pickled vegetables – usually made with *baechoo*, the oriental cabbage (known as Napa cabbage in the US and Chinese leaves in the UK), although it could actually be *any* vegetable. If you know a little bit about Korean food, *kimchi* may immediately make you think of chilli powder. But there are in fact a few types of *kimchi* made without it. However, there is no *kimchi* made without garlic.†

Pretty much every Korean soup is made with a stock laced with garlic, whether it be meat-based or fish-based (typically using anchovy but also shrimp, dried mussel or even sea urchin). Most of those small dishes that cover tables at Korean meals (*banchan*, which translates as 'accompaniments to rice') will have (raw, fried, or boiled) garlic irrespective of whether they contain vegetables, meat or fish, and whether raw, blanched, fried, stewed or boiled.

We Koreans don't just eat garlic. We process it. In industrial quantities. We *are* garlic.

South Koreans went through a staggering 7.5kg of garlic per person per year between 2010 and 2017.[1] We hit a high in 2013 of 8.9kg.[2] That's over ten times what the Italians consume (720g in 2013).[3] When it comes to garlic consumption, we Koreans make

* Superior to the other KFC, in my view.

† Except in Buddhist temples. Buddhist monks are not allowed to consume or cook with garlic or onion, as well as (of course) any animal product.

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the Italians look like 'dabblers'.* The French, 'the' garlic-eaters to the British and the Americans, only manage a paltry 200g per year (in 2017)[4] – not even 3% of that of the Koreans. Amateurs!

OK, we don't ingest the entire 7.5kg. Lots of garlic gets left in the liquid containing the *kimchi*; that liquid is usually thrown away.† When you eat *bulgogi* and other marinated meats, tons of chopped garlic will be left floating around in the meat's marinade. But even allowing for all this squandering of garlic, it's a huge – I mean, huge – quantity.

If you have lived all your life among garlic monsters, you don't realize how much garlic you get through. That was me in late July 1986, when, aged twenty-two, I boarded a Korean Air flight to start my graduate studies in the University of Cambridge. I wasn't quite a complete stranger to air travel with, ahem, four flights under my belt, having twice flown to (and back from) Jeju, the semi-tropical volcanic island south of mainland Korea. It wasn't a lot of flight time. The flight between Seoul and Jeju lasts just under forty-five minutes, so my flying experience at that point was not quite three hours. But it wasn't the prospect of flying that made me nervous.

This was my first time ever leaving South Korea. It wasn't poverty that had kept me grounded. My father had worked as a high-ranking civil servant, and my family was comfortable, if not rich, and could have afforded a foreign holiday. However, in those days no South Korean was allowed to travel abroad for leisure purposes – the government simply wouldn't issue passports for the purpose of leisure. It was the time of government-led industrialization in Korea, and the government wanted to use every dollar of

* According to James Fenton, the British poet and journalist, when reporting for the *Independent* newspaper on the eve of the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

† Sometimes Koreans consume the liquid too. They often use it to flavor fried rice (*bokkum-bap*: *bokkum* meaning 'fried' and *bap* meaning, no, not the bread, but rice), especially if it is *kimchi bokkum-bap*. They may pour it into an uninteresting soup noodle to perk it up or mix it with rice if there is nothing else around.

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export earnings to buy the machines and raw materials needed for economic development. There was no foreign currency to be 'wasted' on 'frivolous' things like foreign holidays.

To make matters worse, travel from Korea to Britain in those days took an unbelievably long time. Today you can fly between Seoul and London in around eleven hours. The Cold War was in full force in 1986, so capitalist planes from South Korea couldn't fly over communist China or the USSR, not to speak of North Korea. First, we flew to Anchorage, Alaska – nine hours. After two hours refuelling (jet oil for the plane, Japanese *udon* noodle soup for me – the first thing I ever tasted outside Korea), we flew for another nine hours to Europe. But not to London. Korean Air didn't then fly to London. So I spent three hours in Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, before my final flight. Thus it took twenty-four hours to get from Gimpo Airport Seoul to Heathrow Airport London – nineteen hours in the air and five hours in airports. It was a world away.

It wasn't simply the distance that made me feel alien. The language barrier, the racial differences and the cultural prejudices I was prepared for – at least to an extent. Daylight till ten in the evening and (later) winter nights that start at four in the afternoon, I could just about handle. It was difficult to accept that the highest temperature on a summer's day might be 15, 16 degrees (Korean summers are tropical – 33 degrees, 95% humidity, that sort of thing), but accept it I had to. Even the rain could be borne – though I hadn't realized that it could rain quite so often.*

The trauma was the food. Back in Korea, I had been warned (by books, that is – few Koreans had actually been there) that British food was not the best. But I hadn't realized how bad it actually was.

OK, I found a few items in Cambridge I liked – steak and kidney pie, fish and chips, Cornish pasties – but most things were, to put it mildly, terrible. Meat was overcooked and under-seasoned. It was

* But not 'so much'. The rainfall in Korea is about the same as that of the UK, at around 1,200–1,300mm per year. Rain in Korea is concentrated in the summer and thus isn't remotely as frequent as that in Britain.

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difficult to eat, unless accompanied by gravy, which could be very good but also very bad. English mustard, which I fell in love with, became a vital weapon in my struggle to eat dinners. Vegetables were boiled long beyond the point of death to become textureless, and there was only salt around to make them edible. Some British friends would argue valiantly that their food was under-seasoned (er, tasteless?) because the ingredients were so good that you oughtn't ruin them with fussy things like *sauces*, which those devious French used because they needed to hide bad meat and old vegetables. Any shred of plausibility in that argument quickly vanished when I visited France at the end of my first year in Cambridge and first tasted real French food.

British food culture in the 1980s was – in a word – conservative, deeply so. The British ate nothing unfamiliar. Food considered *foreign* was viewed with near religious scepticism and visceral aversion. Other than completely Anglicized – and generally dire-quality – Chinese, Indian and Italian, you could not get any alternative cuisine, unless you travelled down to Soho or another sophisticated district in London. British food conservatism was for me epitomized by the now-defunct/then-rampant chain Pizzaland. Realizing that pizza could be traumatically 'foreign', the menu lured customers with an option to have their pizza topped with a baked potato.

As with all discussions of foreignness, of course, this attitude gets pretty absurd when you scrutinize it. The UK's beloved Christmas dinner consists of turkey (North America), potatoes (Peru), carrots (Afghanistan) and Brussels sprouts (from, er, Belgium). But never mind that. Brits then simply didn't 'do foreign'.

Of all the 'foreign' ingredients, the national enemy seemed to be garlic. Back in Korea I had already picked up something about the Brits' dislike of the French predilection for garlic. It was rumoured that the Queen disliked garlic so much that no one was allowed to eat it in Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle while she was in residence. But, until I got there, I had no idea how much stick garlic-eating came in for. For many, it was an act of barbarism, or at

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least a passive-aggressive assault on those around you. A South-east Asian friend tells the story of her B&B landlady coming into the room she rented with her Indian boyfriend, sniffing, then asking sharply whether anyone had been eating garlic (I guess it's the kind of thing brown people might get up to when left unsupervised). Worth noting that there were no cooking facilities in her room.

I had moved to a place where the Korean essence of life was an affront to civility, perhaps even a threat to the civilization itself. OK, I exaggerate. You *could* buy garlic in supermarkets – though the bulbs looked small and wan. Italian-style dishes in British cookbooks included garlic in their recipes – a few slices where I would have thought at least a few cloves were necessary. Even the college cafeteria served certain exotic dishes which claimed to contain garlic – although I couldn't swear they actually did. To escape this culinary hell, I started to cook for myself.

My cooking skills were, however, rather limited at the time. In those days, many Korean mothers wouldn't even let their sons come into the kitchen ('Your willy* will fall off if you enter the kitchen!' was a familiar refrain). The kitchen was the female domain. My mother wasn't that traditional, so I could do a few things in the kitchen, unlike most of my male friends – make good instant *ramen* (surprisingly difficult to make well), put together decent sandwiches, rustle up fried rice with random ingredients found in the fridge and the cupboard, that sort of thing. But that wasn't much of a foundation. Moreover, I didn't have sufficient incentives to cook. I was living alone, and it frankly is no fun cooking for just oneself. Also, when you are in your twenties, you have a good appetite (in Korea we say that 'in your twenties you can digest even stones'), so I was able to wolf it down even if my college canteen threw at me dry, tasteless roast lamb or if I was served – oh, the horror of horrors – overcooked pasta in a restaurant. As a result, in the first several years of my life in Cambridge – first as a graduate student and then as a

* Or *gochoo* (chilli), reflecting the Korean passion for spicy hot food.

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young faculty member – I cooked only occasionally, and my cooking repertoire and skills grew only very slowly.

This created a crisis. My cooking skills weren't advancing, but my *knowledge* of food was expanding fast. Like the cliché: as an academic, perhaps I was better at theory than practice. But the food gap was becoming ridiculous.

The thing was that I had arrived in Britain on the cusp of a culinary revolution. Cracks were appearing on the mighty edifice of British resistance to 'foreign' food, and culinary traditions from outside were starting to trickle in. In the meantime, British cuisine was slowly starting to be upgraded, reinvented and fused with the new influences. Chefs, restaurant reviewers and food critics were becoming celebrities. Cookbooks were becoming as numerous as books on gardening (that peculiar British obsession – which other country airs gardening programmes on TV at peak times in the evening?). Many cookbooks started featuring food histories and cultural commentaries, and not just recipes. With these changes (and my foreign travel), I increasingly encountered cuisines I had known nothing of. I was fascinated. I started trying different foods. I read cookbooks in bookshops and bought quite a few of them. I read avidly the food reviews and features in newspapers. I was starting my own culinary revolution as well.

The truth of the matter is that Korea then was even more of a culinary island than Britain, albeit one with much tastier food. In Korea in that era, aside from Chinese and Japanese places, we had little foreign food other than what was known as 'light Western', essentially 'Japanized' European food. Typical dishes were: *tonkatsu* (schnitzel made with pork, rather than the original Austrian creation with veal); *hahmbahk* (hamburger) steak (a pale imitation of the French *steak haché*, with cheap fillers, like onions and flour, replacing most of the beef); and (very mediocre) spaghetti Bolognese (which was simply called *supageti*). Hamburgers were a rarity, sold as exotic in the cafeterias of upmarket department stores – and weren't very good anyway. The arrival of Burger

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King in the mid 1980s was a cultural event. Most people first learned of pizza around then (Pizza Hut arrived in Seoul in 1985). Before coming to Britain and travelling for work or holiday to the continent, I had never tasted real French or Italian food. The few French and Italian restaurants that we had in Korea at the time served highly Americanized versions. Asian food beyond Japanese or Chinese (no Thai, no Vietnamese, no Indian) was just as mysterious, not to speak of dishes from more remote places like Greece, Turkey, Mexico or Lebanon.

The gap between my food theory and practice started narrowing when I began to cook in earnest once I got married in 1993. Hee-Jeong, my wife, moved from Korea to join me in Cambridge. She couldn't believe that I had more than a dozen cookbooks in my home but had never cooked from them. Given the lack of shelf space in my flat, which was only slightly bigger than a large rug, Hee-Jeong reasonably judged that the books needed be binned, unless they were used.

I started cooking with Claudia Roden's classic, *The Food of Italy*. Italian food, especially southern Italian food, has key ingredients (garlic, chilli, anchovy, aubergine, courgette) that Koreans love, so it came naturally. An aubergine pasta bake with tomato sauce and three cheeses (mozzarella, ricotta and parmesan) was the first Roden dish that I learned to cook. It's still (with a few personal tweaks) a family favourite. Antonio Carluccio's books taught me lots about pastas and risottos. Italian is my main arsenal, but I also love to create, in no particular order: French, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, American, North African and Middle Eastern dishes. And – as proof of the new era we were living in – I learned many great British recipes, especially from Delia Smith, Nigel Slater and Nigella Lawson. I rarely cook Korean dishes, as Hee-Jeong cooks mean Korean food and I cannily avoid competing with her talent.

While I was learning to cook, Britain's culinary revolution was entering a new, and decisive, phase. One could imagine one magical midsummer-night's-dream evening in the mid-1990s, when the

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British people finally awoke to realize that their food was actually terrible. Once you acknowledge that your own food sucks, as the Brits then did, you are free to embrace all the cuisines in the world. There is no reason to insist on Indian over Thai or favour Turkish over Mexican. Everything tasty is fine. What a glorious freedom that brings. The British freedom to consider equally all the choices available has led to it developing perhaps one of the most sophisticated food cultures anywhere.

Britain became a great place to eat. London offers everything – cheap yet excellent Turkish doner kebab, eaten at 1 a.m. from a van on the street; eye-wateringly expensive Japanese *kaiseki* dinner; whatever. Flavours span from vibrant, in-your-face Korean levels to understated but heart-warming Polish. You get to choose between the complexity of Peruvian dishes – with Iberian, Asian and Inca roots – and the simple succulence of Argentinian steak. Most supermarkets and food stores sell ingredients for Italian, Mexican, French, Chinese, Caribbean, Jewish, Greek, Indian, Thai, North African, Japanese, Turkish, Polish, and perhaps even Korean, cuisines. If you want a more specialist condiment or ingredient, it can likely be found. This in a country where, in the late 1970s, according to an American friend who was then an exchange student, the only place you could score olive oil in Oxford was a pharmacy (for softening ear wax, if you're wondering).*

It's a global trend of course. With increase in international trade, international migration and international travel, people everywhere have become more curious about and open to foreign foods. Yet Britain is different – perhaps unique – in that, since its moment of honest self-awareness (foodwise), the country has become entirely relaxed about the food it eats. In Italy and France, where strong culinary traditions are entrenched, the locals are defensive and twitchy about change. You can find their great national food, but little else beyond American fast-food joints, cheap Chinese

* Checking today (14 January 2022), Tesco website lists 43 varieties of olive oil, Sainsbury's 60, and Waitrose 70.

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restaurants and a couple of shops selling falafels or kebabs (those could be very good, but not necessarily) plus maybe a hugely overpriced Japanese restaurant.

While my food universe was expanding at lightning speed, the other universe of mine – economics – was, sadly, being sucked into a black hole. Up to the 1970s, economics was populated by a diverse range of 'schools' containing different visions and research methodologies – Classical, Marxist, Neoclassical, Keynesian, Developmentalist, Austrian, Schumpeterian, Institutionalist and Behaviouralist, to name only the most significant.* Not only did they coexist but they interacted with each other. Sometimes they clashed in a 'death match' – the Austrians vs. the Marxists in the 1920s and the 1930s, or the Keynesians vs. the Neoclassicals in the 1960s and the 1970s. At other times, the interactions were more benign. Through debates and policy experiments tried by different governments around the world, each school was forced to hone their arguments. Different schools borrowed ideas from each other (often without proper acknowledgement). Some economists even tried the fusion of different theories. Economics until the 1970s was, then, rather like the British food scene today: many different cuisines, each

* They had (and still have) different visions in the sense that they had different moral values and political positions, while understanding the way the economy works in different ways. No need here to concern yourself with the exact differences between them. I consider the relative merits of each in my last book, *Economics: The User's Guide* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), if you'd like to know more. The critical thing to keep in mind here is that economics is not a science; there are no perfect provable answers. There is no single economic solution or model that works in all situations – choosing the right economic answer depends on the circumstances of the economy and the conditions it faces. It also depends on what you morally or ethically decide is most important for the country's citizens – as we have seen from the stark international differences in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences. Economics is a study of human activity with all the emotion, ethical stands and imagination that everything human involves.

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with different strengths and weaknesses, competing for attention; all of them proud of their traditions but obliged to learn from each other; with lots of deliberate and unintentional fusion happening.

Since the 1980s, economics has become the British food scene before the 1990s. One tradition – Neoclassical economics – has become the only item on the menu. Like all other schools it has its strengths; it also has serious limitations. This ascent of the Neoclassical school is a complex story, which can't be adequately considered here.* Whatever the causes, Neoclassical economics is today so dominant in most countries (Japan and Brazil, and, to a lesser extent, Italy and Turkey are exceptions) that the term, 'economics', has – for many – become synonymous with 'Neoclassical economics'. This intellectual 'monocropping' has narrowed the intellectual gene pool of the subject. Few Neoclassical economists (that is, the vast majority of economists today) even acknowledge the existence, never mind the intellectual merits, of other schools. Those that do assert the other varieties to be inferior. Some ideas, like those of the Marxist school, they will argue, are 'not even economics'. It's claimed that the few useful insights these other schools once possessed – say, for instance, the Schumpeterian school's idea of innovation or the idea of limited human rationality from the

* The story would have many ingredients. Academic factors – like the merits and demerits of different schools and the increasing dominance of mathematics as a research tool (which advanced knowledge of particular kinds while suppressing others) – of course have mattered. However, the ascent has also been critically shaped by power politics – both within the economics profession and in the outside world. In terms of professional power politics, the promotion of Neoclassical economics by the so-called Nobel Prize in economics (it is not a real Nobel prize but only a 'prize in memory of Alfred Nobel', given by Riksbank, the Swedish central bank) has played a big role. In terms of power politics beyond the profession, the Neoclassical school's inherent reticence to question the distribution of income, wealth, and power underlying any existing socio-economic order has made it more palatable to the ruling elite. The globalization of education during the post-Second World War era, in which the disproportionate 'soft' cultural power of the US has been the biggest influence, has played a crucial role in spreading Neoclassical economics, which had become dominant in the US first (in the 1960s).

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