

*The following is an excerpt from Chapter Five of my dissertation, Not on the Menu: Korean American Students' Experiences of Food and Belonging in Higher Education. This chapter introduces the "gimbap chat," a food-centered research method I developed for this study, grounded in Suda (수다), a Korean relational practice of conversation.*

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## **Chapter 5: Gimbap Chat**

In the dining hall, I had watched students eat alone. Tray set down, headphones in, phone propped against a water bottle, fork moving without much thought. The room was full and yet somehow several occupied tables felt quiet. Many students sat within feet of each other and did not speak. The food on their trays, whatever rotation the dining hall was offering that week, disappeared efficiently, purposelessly, the way food does when eating is only about finishing.

The room I borrowed for the gimbap chat always ended up smelling like rice. Not the faint, institutional smell of large quantities of boiled rice sitting on a warming tray, but the full, close warmth of rice that has just finished cooking in a rice cooker, the kind that fills a small space and stays there. Around the table, students who had introduced themselves less than an hour ago were laughing. Someone held up a gimbap roll that had come apart at one end, rice escaping from the seaweed, and announced that hers was the ugliest one on the table. Another person immediately disagreed, holding up her own misshapen roll as evidence. A third said she had already eaten more pieces than she could count but was already planning her next roll, because an ugly one was basically an excuse to try again. The laughter that followed was easy and unguarded. These students were not yet friends, exactly, but they were something. In the sweet-smelling air of that small room, passing rice and sesame oil across a shared table, they had become people who laughed together, which is not nothing. Which is, in fact, quite a lot.

These were the gimbap chats.

### **Cooking Together, Suda'ing Together**

The previous chapter examined how Korean American undergraduate students described their food experiences through individual, semi-structured interviews. Those accounts illuminated the texture of daily life in campus dining halls: the rice that never quite tastes right, the longing for foods that carry memory and meaning, the work of navigating an institutional food system that was not designed with them in mind. This chapter turns to the second major source of data in this study: the gimbap chats.

The gimbap chats were three group sessions in which student participants made and ate gimbap together, talked, and lingered. The first session, held in early May, included five participants. The second, later that same month, included two participants due to scheduling conflicts. The third, at the end of May, included four participants. They were not focus groups in the conventional sense. They did not follow a structured protocol or move systematically through

a predetermined set of questions. They were designed, instead, to reflect Suda in its fullest expression: open, relational, unhurried, and shaped by what participants brought to the conversation rather than what I directed them toward (Meacham et al., 2022). Food preparation was not incidental to this design. It was structural. The act of rolling gimhap together gave participants something to do with their hands, made silence comfortable rather than awkward, and created natural entry points into conversation that no prompt could reliably replicate.

A note on attribution is warranted before proceeding. Unlike the individual interview data analyzed in the previous chapter, the gimhap chats were group settings in which students often shared more personal and spontaneous disclosures than what they shared during the one-on-one interviews they previously participated in. Because these disclosures emerged in a collective context and frequently built on what others were saying, I have chosen not to attribute specific statements to named participants in this chapter. Instead, findings are presented collectively, drawing on patterns and exchanges across all three sessions. Where direct quotations appear, they are identified by session number only. This approach reflects my commitment to protecting the relational and sometimes vulnerable nature of what students shared in these gatherings.

In this chapter, I make two interconnected arguments. The first is empirical. The themes that emerged in the gimhap chats largely echoed those from the individual interviews: the inadequacy of campus dining, the cultural weight of Korean food, the experience of homesickness, the relationship between food and belonging. The collective format, however, changed the register of how students expressed these themes. Students spoke with greater ease, more humor, and more directly about their feelings regarding Korean food in the presence of peers than they had alone with a researcher. Critiques that may have been softened or statements that were hedged in individual interviews became collective naming. Private experiences that students had carried as personal grievances became, in the group setting, shared ones. Consequently, as I will discuss in depth in this chapter, I was able to understand more about the intensity of food-related experiences for the students.

The second argument is methodological. The gimhap chat format produced conditions for a kind of collective, embodied knowledge that was distinct from the individual interviews. Conversation that happened alongside food preparation was qualitatively different from the individual interviews or from group conversations that happened without the activity of rolling gimhap. At first, participants sat around making perfunctory small talk about exams or the weather, with their bodies mostly oriented toward me, the researcher. The moment we started rolling gimhap together, however, our bodies faced each other more like a circle, and conversations quickly became deeper. No one rushed to fill the silences between exchanges, as the shared activity and rhythms of rolling and passing ingredients filled the space with comfort. In this chapter, I argue that Suda-informed, food-centered methods generate a specific form of relational knowledge (Meacham et al., 2022), and that the gimhap chat, as a method developed for this study, represents a contribution to how qualitative researchers across disciplines might think about data collection as an act of care rather than extraction (Patel, 2015; Tuck & Yang, 2013).

**[Excerpt ends here. The chapter continues by covering three gimhap chat sessions, what participants said in the group setting versus the individual interviews, and my own reflections on what the method asked of me as a researcher.]**

## References

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