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**Daerim Dong as a Korean Chinatown:
Setbacks and challenges**

By

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Prelude

In Seoul, Korea, there is an official Chinatown located in the neighborhood of Icheon area, which was established in 1884. It is also known as “A Chinatown without Chinese people”. In the meantime, Daerim Dong (大林洞), about 90% of whose residents are Korean Chinese, has been denied the petition of being granted as “Korean Chinatown”. This conflicting scenario has sparked the attention of those researchers who have special inquisitive minds to overseas Chinese communities. My primitive research and subsequent observations spinning off this curiosity are the focus of this essay.

The connection between Daerim Dong and Chinese people

In 1992, Korea and the People’s Republic of China established a formal diplomatic relationship. Accordingly, one of the immediate benefits to both nations after the diplomatic establishment was increasing labor supply in Seoul and job opportunities for Chinese citizens. Guro Industrial Complex, which was a district with vibrant garment business, and geographically located near Daerim Dong, provided a variety of working openings for Chinese women and their families. Needless to say, many Chinese people, seeking better financial future, started to cross the border to work in Seoul. Consequently, work pursuits contributed to a dense population of Chinese immigrants into Garibong-dong and Guro-dong areas, where Guro Industrial Complex was situated, in the 1990s.

With time passing, as redevelopment was undertaken during the advent of the 21st century, those two areas evolved as a high technology world, with rapidly swelling rent, in Seoul. Inevitably, this development caused the relocation of their Chinese residents to the neighboring Daerim Dong, where the housing was relatively affordable to them. The trend partially explained why there was a sharp growth of Chinese population in that district.

Meanwhile, Korean’s {Employment Permit System} was introduced in 2004. Within this system, {Foreign Worker Act} offered incentives to professional and non-professional foreigners. Thereafter, tens of thousands of Korean Chinese (different from Chinese Koreans), who had left Korea in the fight against Japanese occupation in the early 20th century and resided in China around provinces of Jilin, Heilongjiang, and Liaoning, decided to return to their native country. A great

majority of them have made homes near Daerim Dong, and engaged themselves in labor intensive jobs ever since.

Daerim Dong: A slice of China in Seoul

The statistics show that in 2016 the number of Chinese in Korea skyrocketed to over eight hundred thousand, and apparently Daerim Dong took a huge share of this pie. Along with the crowded landscape of population, ethnic Chinese business has also been flourishing in this neighborhood. In fact, the aroma of Chinese food, people's conversation in Chinese, and stores' Chinese shingles would be self-explanations that this vicinity is not just another street block of Seoul. (Picture 1)



(Picture 1)

Taking Seoul Metro with lines 2 or 7 and getting off at Daerim Station with exit 12 (Picture 2) out to the street, you will be facing the street of Beodeuamu-gil. Then, the overwhelming density of Chinese presence would help you understand the origin of the running joke “*Daerim Dong is the shortest destination from Seoul to China.*”



(Picture 2)

While both Daerim Dong and the official Korean Chinatown at Incheon have shown strong Chinese cultural heritage, their lucid characteristics and acceptance by Korean residents have striking differences at a variety of aspects. Within this essay, my approach of looking into the Daerim Chinese district steers clear of the tour-site attractions which are the signature for Incheon Chinatown, but almost nonexistent in this area.

With this understanding in mind, I started with the direction of booming business and the ethnic food accessible in this neighborhood plus a controversial animal meat which could be easily obtained in the meat markets or restaurants. In addition, my focus also touches on one group of residents, who are interestingly intertwined with my subject.

A magnet area for Chinese merchandise

Speaking of merchandise shopping, this vicinity, along quite a few street blocks, is lined up with a slew of tiny grocery stores; fruit and vegetable stands; meat or seafood shops; bread or cake bakeries, specialty stores for living necessities, etc. For those customers who are into one-

stop shopping to cross off all the items on the shopping list quickly, there is also a sizable Daerim Junggang Market, with a wide range of Chinese grocery products, to serve their needs. Besides, periodically there is also a street festival set up to attract more visitors coming here for combined activities. One feature across almost all the business affairs signifies that this is a living community for residential purpose, not being targeted for sightseeing or souvenir purchases.

Aside from the above, strolling down this locality, visitors can't possibly miss the frequent appearances of cellphone shops and foreign exchange offices, which seem not so compatible with other types of business. Their existence may be out of necessities, which are not well known to occasional visitors, like myself.

It goes without saying that dining for Chinese food is another draw of making a visit to this district. Visitors would not get disappointed because Daerim has a wealth of ethnic food ready for those Chinese patrons who really have craves for their hometown food.

Chinese cuisine is in fact a collective term for a medley of delicious food whose variety is as diverse as Chinese dialects. Roughly speaking, its origin could be divided by eight regions of Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Hunan, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Sandong, and Jiangsu. Certainly, special cooking techniques and ingredients have been applied to make each area having its distinctive style. However, despite the diversified details, they all possess aromatic flavors. Among them, they can be categorized, more or less, as: sweet; sour; hot; and salty.

With the contributions by Chinese immigrants from those regions, the staple Chinese food which is well known to and immensely loved by American people mainly are (in alphabetical order): Chow Mein; Chow Fan; Dumplings; Fried rice; Kung Pao Chicken; Low Mein; Ma Po Tofu; Peking roasted duck; Spring rolls; Sweet and sour pork; Wontons, etc.

A plethora of Northeastern Chinese food

As mentioned before, the main composites of Chinese immigrants to Daerim are from provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning, and all of these Chinese areas are geographically located within the region of Northeast (aka Dongbei) of China.

From the above list of eight regions, it is clear that Dongbei is not among them. Why is this particular region excluded from the regional classifications by most, if not all, literature researches when it comes to classifying regional Chinese cuisine? Possible answers to this question could be as variant as Chinese food itself, and my shallow knowledge fails me to provide a persuasive explanation. Nevertheless, on-site tasting of many Dongbei dishes during my trip to

Daerim, and subsequent literature research, I am here making an attempt to depict the characteristics of Dongbei Cuisine with hope that the answer to the above question becomes self-explanatory afterwards.

Quite a few literature indicates that many dishes of Dongbei cuisine actually had their origins from Manchu cuisine. Besides, this regional food is also heavily mirrored by the cuisines of Sandong, which belongs to one of eight regions; Beijing; Mongolia; and Russia.

First of all, it is the convenience of geographical proximity, tasty dishes were easy to spread from one location to the other via frequent travels by the people; Secondly, all of those districts are subjected to weather through frigid Winter and short growing season, so in the season with extreme coldness people tend to rely on preserved foods (pickling) from other months of the year. Therefore, It's not a surprise to know local people are ardent about the eating style of **Dongbei hot pot** (東北火鍋). The fashion for this dish is that plates containing a variety of ready-to-be-cooked foodstuffs, such as sliced meat, leafy vegetables, tofu, seafood, dumplings, etc. are placed around the dining table, along with a simmering pot in the middle. Then self-help cooking takes place right before eating.

The beauty of this arrangement is that the ingredient preparation prior to eating is not time consuming and food can be kept warm during the entire dining period. Generally speaking, no kitchen skills, besides making pot simmering, are absolutely necessary when it comes to cooking. My uneducated guess is that this simplicity may deter Northeastern dishes from being on the list of regional dishes. Nonetheless, other people's judgement does not affect local residents' craziness about this simple way of food intake, even after they immigrated into Seoul.

Along the streets of Daerim Dong, hot pot restaurants are definitely the crown jewel among the ethnic food providers. Besides, a vast array of varieties would exhibit other selections even if they want to bypass the calling of hot pot style. More often than not, most restaurants also offer the choices of skewer meat; Lamb kebabs; Fish banquet; or Malatong (spicy soup) etc. In addition, your appetites may have succumbed to street vendors who sell delicious appetizers such as: Xiao Long Bao (小籠包); Tang Yuan (glutinous balls湯圓); Green onion pancakes (蔥油餅); Youtiao (Fried curl油條); soup dumplings (湯餃), or some savory snacks, for instance: Tang hulu (sweet apples糖葫蘆); Mahwah (twisted bread, 麻花) before you make your way to a restaurant for a meal, for this community's specialty food.

Joseon Jok's love for dog meat

I spent all day in Daredim, and enjoyed many kinds of said food items, EXCEPT Dongbei hot pot, not because my stomach had no room for this consumption, but because almost every restaurant catering to hot pot dish also furnished **dog meat** as one of the ingredients. (Picture 3) As a fervid dog lover, I could not suppress my disgusting feeling to patronize the restaurants which made this choice on the menus. While I missed the chance to realize the joy of dining with Dongbei hot pot dish, I harvested the finding, resulting from the unexpected yield of dog meat in that district, of an interesting topic which is being unfolded as follows.

The wide supply of dog meat in the community of Daerim Dong reminded me of a phenomenon in the market of Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture (延邊朝鮮族自治州), whose major residents are bilingual Koreans, known as Joseon-Jok (Chaoxianzu 朝鮮族), who were motivated by bright economic outlook on the Chinese side near the two-country border and had migrated into Northeastern China. According to the local tour guide of my travel group, their population, scattering in the provinces of Lianing, Heilongjiang, and Jilin, was totaled about 1.8 million in 2018. The guide also added “*Dog meat ranks on top when it comes to the meat assumption of this race*” No wonder was this target food clearly, out of my observation, among good selling merchandise, from meat markets to restaurants in Jilin.

Back then during my trip in China, it was not in my wildest imagination that the appearance of dog meat in Daerim Dong became a thread connecting my encounters in Jilin with Chaoxianzu's role in Seoul's Daerim Dong.



(Picture 3)

Joseon Jok and Daerim Dong

In addition to Northeast China, there is a huge quantity in the amount of over 400,000 Joseon-Jok, who have moved back to South Korea from China since the 1990s, scattering in Seoul, and a great majority of them stay within the neighborhoods of Daerim Dong and Garibong Dong. In fact, Daerim, reportedly a home to around 30,000 Chinese nationals, has about 90% of its residents who are classified within this category, and they have been termed as “Chinese compatriots”--too different to be Chinese.

However, Koreans, who think they are not good enough to be of their own kind, treat them like foreigners. Although they are ranked, with the number of population, the largest group of *foreign citizens* in South Korea, racial discrimination, due to their complex identity, has been weighed in as the open wound in the communities where they reside in.

Many Korean locals possess negative perceptions toward them, so most of the workers of this ethnic group are, comparatively, underpaid, and frustration was one of the factors which contributed to why high rates of alcohol or drug abuse and related night crimes were frequently

associated with their group. When I was asking for directions in a subway station about how to get to Daerim Dong, the person who let me know the train information also gave me the advice “*Do not hang around there by yourself after 6pm*”. As a visitor, I kept this “warning” in mind, and I left there before the sun went down, so I could not bear witness to this piece of information.

I also have an impression that Korean motion picture industry, along with the general media, was sort of harsh to them, and this act also, unfortunately, took the Chinese community as a victim. Two Korean films Yellow sea and the outlaws; Midnight runners, both have plots which depict Joseon Jok as violent gang members and Chinatown as the setting for their crimes. The releases of these two movies triggered outrage among the association of Joseon Jok, so the crimes in the district had a spike during that period of time.

Nevertheless, as the common sense has taught us that reactions caused by films can arise and subside with time passing, the crimes of this nature would dissipate. Then, what is the permanent scar? From my viewpoint after fingering through some stories, the problem rests on that native Koreans treat them as “overseas” Koreans, but they want to be Koreans if the choice is offered, rather than being labelled: Korean Chinese! As a result, Joseon Jok often feels victimized by his own country.

Conclusion

All of the above descriptions can serve as hints leading to the terms with “*why Daerim Dong has been denied the petition of being granted as Korean’s 2nd Chinatown*”, as being brought up in the beginning of this essay. My inclination of this outcome is that this is a consequence with multi-faced conflicts of residents’ identities; inconsolable cultural differences; severe social prejudice and recent economic development in Seoul, Korea.

Furthermore, as I am laying out my findings, I also read a news report that protests by *nearby* (NOT even in the area of Daerim) residents were waged to shut down the city’s attempt to legally name this district a “Chinatown”, for fear of the depreciation of their property values. This blow is adding ice to a pile of snow to the Chinese community, so the path for Daerim Dong as Korean’s 2nd Chinatown seems diminishing.

While the fight is against all odds, the community advocates and the local government still show that they would never, nonetheless, lose their faith on making this ideal a reality in the future, because they all believe the old saying “ **There is a will, there is a way**”.

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