

Highly Popular Drama Influences Perceptions of Korea

Viewers of the immensely popular television drama *Daeganggeum (Jewel in the Palace)* are keen to try Korean food and have a positive image of the country, according to the SHTM's Dr Samuel Seongseop Kim, Dean and Chair Professor Kaye Chon and a co-researcher. In a recently published study of customers at Korean restaurants in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, the researchers find that the drama's portrayal of Korea and its national cuisine provides a strong impetus for people to visit the destination.

Jewel in the Palace

In today's media-dominated world, films and television programmes can have an "enormous" influence on the locations they portray, the researchers suggest. Many tourists are interested in "film destinations or film story-related destinations" and want to visit the places portrayed in them. At the same time, food has become "an important attraction for a tourism destination", given that it can strongly affect a potential visitor's expectations about that locality. When translated into an actual visit, this helps to generate "economic benefits to the tourist-receiving community", note the researchers.

Although infrequently considered in this light, when film and food converge in perceptions of a destination, they are likely to form "a very effective contributor to attract tourists", in the researchers' words. Fitting well into this scenario, the Korean television drama series *Daeganggeum* features a "cooking maid's experience amid political conspiracies and faction fighting" in a king's palace, highlighting "the use of Korean traditional cuisine and medicine".

This highly popular series comprising 70 episodes was first aired in Korea in 2003 and has since been shown in 55 other countries. It is particularly popular in Asia, and the researchers note that it has been "connected to the enhancement of the national image of Korea" and an increase in tourism to the country. In particular, the drama's use of Korean food storylines is believed to have had a positive effect on tourists' images of and intention to visit Korea.

However, given the scant evidence available to support this belief, the researchers set out to determine the precise effects of *Daeganggeum* on tourists' perceptions of Korea's national image and food, and whether it increased their intention to visit the country for "food tourism".

Korean Restaurant Customers Surveyed

The researchers conducted their study in three Asian countries to determine whether the drama had different effects on people from different cultures. In all three places, *Daeganggeum* had been "extremely popular". Hong Kong SAR, China, was chosen because the series was the most watched in its broadcasting history, with an average audience of 37%. *Daeganggeum* was equally successful in Taiwan, the second country considered, and following its airing in Thailand, the third country selected, there was an increase in demand for Korean restaurants, language courses and holidays.

Customers at five Korean restaurants in each country were surveyed. In Hong Kong, four of the restaurants were located on Hong Kong Island and one in Tsim Sha Tsui. Of the Taiwanese restaurants, three were located in Taipei and two in Kaoshiung. In Thailand, all five were located in Sukhumvit Plaza in the part of Bangkok known as "Little Korean Town".

Offered a brief questionnaire to complete while waiting to eat, the customers indicated their reasons for preferring Korean food, such as because it was healthy and low in calories or it allowed them to experience another culture. They were also asked whether they were influenced by *Daeganggeum*, posters of which often appear in Korean restaurants overseas, whether eating Korean food had changed their image of Korea and whether it had increased their intention to visit the country.

The majority of the customers were in their 20s and 30s and they generally had a high level of education, with more than 70% having a college degree or higher. More than half of those surveyed in Hong Kong had visited Korea, while just over 40% of those from Thailand and 21% from Taiwan had visited.

Influence of *Daeganggeum*

For customers in all three places, the researchers found that television and radio were the most influential sources of information in making them want to try Korean cuisine, followed by newspapers and magazines. Their experience of Korean food gave many customers, especially those from Hong Kong, a more positive image of the country, confirming that “food may be an influential medium in changing the national image of Korea”, note the researchers.

Around half of the customers indicated that they had become interested in eating Korean food through watching *Daeganggeum*. This, suggest the researchers, reflects the “strong effects this TV drama has had on these countries”. Furthermore, many of the customers agreed that watching the programme had made them keen to visit Korea to experience the food.

Different Preferences Revealed

There were, however, some differences in the elements of Korean dining and the drama that influenced customers in the three places. For instance, those in Hong Kong and Thailand were particularly taken by the “variety and harmony” of Korean food. A practical implication for Korean restaurants in these places, the researchers suggest, is to make their menus “more visually appealing” with the use of “diverse decorations” to “influence the national image of Korea” formed by Hong Kong and Thai customers.

The Hong Kong customers were also attracted by the healthy aspects of Korean food. The researchers propose that Korean restaurants in the city take advantage of this, providing menus with “natural and health-conscious ingredients rather than a large amount of meats or instant foods”.

Among the Taiwanese and Thai customers, the “uniqueness of Korean food culture” as portrayed in *Daeganggeum* was important. This aspect, the researchers recommend, should be emphasised in restaurant décor through the use of “traditional wooden paper or curtains using natural dyed material” and the creation of “an interior ambience that uses natural acoustics such as the sounds of wind, rain or birds”.

Winning Combination of Drama and Food

Overall, the researchers confirm that *Daeganggeum* has increased the preference for Korean food among Hong Kong, Taiwanese and Thai customers. They conclude that combining the portrayal of food with a destination in a film or television programme can enhance the image of the country and may act as a “magnet” to visitors who want to experience the places and foods portrayed.

Points to Note

- A combination of televisual portrayals of a destination and the appeal of its food can have a sizable economic impact on that destination.
- The food-centric Korean drama *Daeganggeum* has had a strong influence on perceptions of Korean cuisine and Korea as a tourist destination.
- Hong Kong, Taiwanese and Thai customers of Korean restaurants overseas were influenced in largely similar ways, with some important differences.
- Korean restaurant owners could harness these different national preferences to attract particular customers.

Kim, S., Agrusa, J. and Chon, K. (2014). “The Influence of a TV Drama on Visitors’ Perception: A Cross-Cultural Study”. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 536-562.