

**COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TABOO FOOD WORDS IN
KOREAN AND MONGOLIAN¹**

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1. Introduction

Taboo words and phrases related to food etiquette in Korea and Mongolia contain the aggregated wisdom and experiences of peoples with histories of overcoming adversity in given natural environments. Unlike proverbs, taboo words and phrases are linguistically straightforward, part of what people believe and use in their everyday life. Thus, in Korea and Mongolia, two countries the comparison of which shows a contrast between settled and nomadic cultures, the expression in language of taboos related to food habits is different in accordance with customs around sex, religion, politics, and other socio-cultural differences.

Taboos represent a very important moral and behaviour standard in traditional Korean and Mongolian societies. Since ancient times, both cultures have valorised a principle of unity of words and action, and regard the importance of following taboos highly, as shown in frequent references to luck or the absence of luck in every action. Another reason is that through customs and rituals, the members of these societies have restored and replenished their emotional and ethical grounding.

Although the form and substance of the contrasting customs of settled and nomadic nations have changed in current times, the meaning that the related linguistic features contain remains the same. Taboo words and expression are created not to prevent something negative from happening, but to reinforce some aspect of behaviour and reflect the wisdom of the elders, so that the members of society can lead a better life.

Taboo words and expressions related to food habits in both Korean and Mongolian, formed on the basis of the considerations above, clearly show the cultural differences between Korea and Mongolia through language. Korean exhibits language phenomena rooted in a settled agricultural culture and Confucian ideas, while Mongolian shows phenomena congruent with a nomadic culture and animistic folk beliefs.

From this point of view, the purpose of this study is to explore common strands as well as differences between these North-East Asian cultures through the study of food culture, an important aspect of the mentality of people in both countries, and specifically through the analysis of the different systems of meaning and ways of expressing taboo

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words related to food culture in Korea and Mongolia.

We will compare these taboo words and phrases according to the following categories: holidays, everyday etiquette, tragedies, celebrations, commemorative rites and rituals, pregnancy and women, and food habits in the family.

2. Examples of taboo words and phrases related to eating habits in Korean and Mongolian societies

Table 1. Holiday-related taboos

Category	Korea	Mongolia
Holidays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you eat dinner early on the 14th day of the first month of the year, the farming season will come early • If the salt merchant comes on the first day of the first month, you will become poor • If you don't drink alcohol on the 15th of the first month, your ears won't hear well • It is bad not to eat five-grain porridge (made of glutinous rice, proso millet, glutinous sorghum, black beans, and red adzuki beans) on the morning of the 15th of the first month • If you eat a dog that was born in the first month, you will die within the next three years • If you leave food after a meal on the last day of the year, you will stay poor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't walk outside while chewing on the last day of the year • You don't leave empty dishes outside on the last night of the year—you either put something inside them or turn them over • You don't shake hands if there is flour on them on the last day of the year • It is prohibited to drink or offer much alcohol on New Year's Day • It is prohibited to drink alcohol and sing songs on New Year's Day • They drink kumis or weak alcoholic drinks in the period from the last day of the year to the third day of the new year, but refrain from hard liquor • They refrain from getting drunk on New Year's Day

Table 2. Taboos related to everyday etiquette

Category	Korea	Mongolia
Everyday etiquette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is harmful not to eat red adzuki bean porridge on your moving day • If you eat somebody else's grain, you will be born as a cow after you die, and then after three years of farm work you will be born as a human again • If you throw scorched rice on the road, luck will escape you • It is unlucky to make an even number of blocks of fermented soybeans • You will become poor if you eat while wearing a hat • It is harmful for your body to eat from a broken dish • If you eat uncooked rice, your mother will die • You will have a short life span if you eat someone's leftovers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The host receives the guest with utmost sincerity and does not open the guest's present before the guest leaves • The guests have to try at least a little bit of food and tea that is offered to them before they put it down • When the host offers food, you don't say 'I'm full, I've just eaten' • People do not drink tea before the first spoon is offered to the spirits of the mountains and sky • The lady of the house boils fresh tea and does not put it in front of the guest, but always in the guest's hands • You don't stand and drink tea poured for you • You don't put tea and food in a dish with your left hand

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your relationship with a person will suffer if you eat their leftovers • If you eat with someone else’s spoon and chopsticks, you will argue with that person • It is unlucky to put a spoon or chopsticks inside a dish • You will have no luck if you put a knife on the dining table • If you eat a lot you will be reborn as a bear • It is bad to climb over the dining table • It will delay your success if you put a <i>bagaji</i> (a gourd-like dipper) on the table • Luck will leave you if you take small scoops of food with a spoon • If you cut pieces of food with a knife and eat them, you will die from a knife wound • Luck will leave you if you eat from a chipped dish • It is not good to take out grain after dark • If you lick meat bones, you will be born as a dog after you die • If a person eats food a cat has eaten from, they will become a cat after they die • You will become an evil spirit if you eat pollock or chicken for more than three years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don’t pour or put an excessive amount of tea or food in a dish • When eating, first the superior and only then the inferior takes their spoon and chopsticks • When you throw away food leftovers or wastewater, you do not spill it outside from inside the house. You need to go outside to pour it out. It is believed that luck will leave you if you don’t • You cannot touch your food before the elders do • It is strictly forbidden to drink alcohol in front of the elders • Throwing milk or food on the ground is forbidden • If a piece of meat you are holding in your hands to eat unexpectedly falls on the ground, it is believed to be done by a spirit, and you do not pick it up and continue eating it
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Table 3. Taboos related to tragedies, celebrations, and commemorative rites and rituals

Category	Korea	Mongolia
Mishaps, celebrations, and commemorative rites and rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is bad not to throw a little piece of <i>tteok</i>, made for the child’s first birthday, on the ground • A child will fall often when they grow up if there is no <i>tteok</i> for their first birthday • It is harmful to break a dish on someone’s birthday • If you eat scorched rice on your birthday, you will live in poverty • If you eat bean paste soup on your birthday, you will live in poverty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is prohibited to take the wrong seat at a party or to sit with the front of your coat open • It is prohibited to talk when someone is singing a song or performing music at a party • Arguing, going in and out frequently, and similar disruptive behaviour is prohibited at a party • It is prohibited to break the rules at a party • It is prohibited to sit cross-legged at a party

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You will have no luck if you don't make and eat <i>tteok</i> on your birthday • If you don't dish up a lot of food on your birthday, you will not be blessed with things to eat • If you cook porridge on your birthday, you will live in poverty • You don't eat red adzuki beans when there is mourning in a house in the neighbourhood • It is harmful for a pregnant woman to eat food on the days of the celebration of the baby's first 100 days or one year • Women in their 10th month of pregnancy do not go to parties • It is bad to eat food used in rituals while it's steaming hot • It is bad if a hair falls into ritual food • If you eat ritual food first, your lips will blister • If you drink <i>kamju</i> (sweet rice drink) that has been used in rituals, your ears will hurt • If a baby cries during a ritual, something unfortunate will happen in the family • It is bad to give ritual food from other houses to a young child • If you prepare kimchi on someone's death day, one more person will die 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is prohibited to smoke cigarettes at a party • At a party after the first song has started, it is prohibited to take your seat before the song is finished • Men are generally considered members of the community when they reach 18. When they reach 33, they can grow sideburns, and after 40, they are allowed to drink up to three glasses of vodka • It is prohibited to get drunk and behave violently at a party • It is prohibited to drink too much at a party and exhibit drunken behaviour
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Table 4. Taboos related to pregnancy and women

Category	Korea	Mongolia
Pregnancy and women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If a new mother touches an egg or something yellow in the first week after giving birth, it will have a negative impact on the baby • If items from a home with a new baby leave the house, the mother will not produce enough breast milk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pregnant women do not eat rich food such as game • Pregnant women do not try food from faraway regions • Pregnant women do not drink or smoke • Pregnant women do not eat in homes where there has been a stillbirth or in crowded places

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is harmful for a pregnant woman to eat food on the days of the celebration of the baby's first 100 days or one year • If a new mother touches an egg or something yellow in the first week after giving birth, it will have a negative impact on the baby • If items from a home with a new baby leave the house, the mother will not produce enough breast milk • It is harmful for a pregnant woman to eat food on the days of the celebration of the baby's first 100 days or one year • You do not hunt or catch animals after giving birth. If you grill fish after having a baby, the baby will have bad future • It is bad to eat dog meat, mudfish, or squid after you have a baby • You can't eat dog after you became pregnant • You can't eat chicken while you are pregnant • If a pregnant woman sees a big snake become a dragon and go up to the sky, she will miscarry • If you eat furry animals during pregnancy, you will have a malformed child • Women in their 10th month of pregnancy do not go to parties • A woman who eats Chinese cabbage roots will be deserted by her husband • It is harmful if a maiden prepares food for a new mother • If you eat your food in a <i>ssam</i> (leaf wrap with rice and condiments) from the first bite, you will have a daughter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tea is poured by the lady of the house or by children
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Table 5. Taboos related to food habits in the family

Category	Korea	Mongolia
Food habits in the family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you lie down while eating, you are born as a cow in the next life • If you support your rice bowl with your hand, you will become poor • It is bad to support your chin while eating • If you pile up rice in your bowl, your parents will pass away • If you hold your spoon and sigh after you've eaten, your parents will pass away early • If you lie down at the same place you have just eaten, you will become a cow after you die • If you change seats after you have eaten, you will move house a lot • If you spill food, you will have a lot of dependants • If you hit your upper jaw with a spoon, you will become poor • It is harmful if a chopstick breaks during a meal • If you talk during a meal you will become poor • If you clean during a meal, you will have to beg for food • If you sing before a meal, three generations of your family will beg for food • If you get slapped before a meal, you will have no luck • If you drink water before first giving it to elders, the cup will stick to your mouth • If you stir boiling food with the chopsticks of an elder, this elder will be eating 'hell's food' • If you leave soup in your bowl, luck will leave you • If you scold someone when a dish is broken, more dishes will be broken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there is plenty of tasty food, you should avoid it and not come close to it • If you acquire a taste for bitter food, you will become addicted to alcohol • Overeating should be refrained from • You don't pour tea in a chipped dish • Tea is poured clockwise • Tea is poured so that the neck of the kettle points to the west, north-west, or north • When tea is poured, you are careful not to breathe in its direction and not to spatter when talking • You can't put your right thumb on the mouth of the dish when you pour tea • When tea is poured, it is given to the elders first • You do not pour tea that is already made to a person that has just entered (but instead brew new tea) • You drink tea without leaving leaves at the bottom of the dish • You do not lick the dish you have drunk tea from • You do not throw away tea leaves

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you sit on a threshold when you eat, you beg for food • If you cut out a <i>bagaji</i> (gourd-like dipper) on the dining table and eat there, you have no success • It is bad when chopsticks do not match during a morning meal 	
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As we can infer from the examples above, the reason Korea and Mongolia have so many taboos related to food habits as compared to other countries in North-East Asia is that in both societies, food is viewed as grace from the heavens. Both Koreans and Mongolians feel that this blessing cannot be carelessly wasted; and if it is, the blessing disappears. Accordingly, leaving leftovers or stepping over the dining table with food or dishware is a strict taboo.

There are also common features found in the taboo words and related to phrases wishing for luck. It is traditional party etiquette in Korea to honour the god of the earth by putting a small piece of *tteok* on the ground. Similarly, Mongolians believe that if you unexpectedly drop a piece of meat you are eating on the ground, you should leave it there, because it was a spirit's doing.

Thus, a look at Korean and Mongolian folk beliefs shows that ideas about food etiquette frequently involve taboo words and phrases. Through these words and phrases, we can get a better grasp on such aspects of traditional family life and culture in Korea and Mongolia as views on the afterlife, views on the environment, and perceptions of sex and social status.

Based on the examples above, we attempted to analyse the mentality of taboo words related to food habits in both cultures, as seen in the table below.

Taboos related to food habits	Cultural mentality			
	Korea	Mongolia	Commonalities	Differences
Holiday-related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originate blessings • Inspire sense of propriety toward food • Encourage diligence • Teach about food habits • Induce readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire sense of propriety toward food • Teach about food habits • Prevent carelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire sense of propriety toward food • Teach about food habits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday customs are more important in Mongolia, and folk beliefs and superstitions are important in Korea
Related to everyday etiquette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire filial piety • Teach food habits • Stress the importance of community customs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspire filial piety • Teach about food habits • Stress the importance of etiquette in the reception of guests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach about food habits • Inspire filial piety • Odd numbers are good, even numbers are bad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guest reception etiquette is important in Mongolia, and local community customs are important in Korea

<p>Related to sad and happy occasions and commemorative rites and rituals</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin of blessings • Stress the importance of Confucian commemorative rites • Prevent carelessness during rites • Induce readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress the importance of party etiquette • Stress the importance of community customs • Inspire filial piety • Prevent carelessness during parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent carelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nomadic practices are important in Mongolia, and Confucian commemorative rites are important in Korea
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach healthy diet in pregnancy • Discriminate against women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach healthy diet in pregnancy • Give preferential treatment to pregnant women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach healthy diet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Mongolia there is little gender discrimination, but the Confucian idea of male superiority is clearly seen in Korea
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach manners during meals • Prevent laziness • Encourage diligence • Prevent carelessness • Inspire filial piety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress the importance of tea ceremony • Teach manners during meals • Inspire filial piety • Teach guest reception etiquette • Prevent carelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach manners during meals • Prevent carelessness • Inspire filial piety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confucianism has different levels of importance between the societies

3. Conclusion

If we look in general at the taboo words and phrases above, we see that food culture–related taboos in both societies are connected with the primitive beliefs or superstitions of the people, and stem in part from the social system, the natural environment, and the way of life. Koreans have many taboos related to everyday life superstitions, while Mongolian taboos reflect not only everyday life but also etiquette, nature, and so on.

To compare the spiritual cultures of Korea and Mongolia, which represent the contrast between an agricultural and a nomadic society, comparison in several areas is necessary. Taboo words related to everyday food culture, which is shared by an individual with his

or her family and circle of relatives, are an important element of spiritual culture. This is one area that must certainly be analysed when comparing and studying two different cultures.

The natural environment in Korea and Mongolia is quite different. From the endless challenges and trials of adaptation and survival in a given natural setting, the most appropriate and apposite taboo words and phrases emerge. The knowledge accumulated in the process of understanding the environment and the profound logic of nature constitutes folk culture, including taboos related to food habits.

From this perspective, research into taboo words and expressions related to eating habits, which are especially abundant in these two cultures, can be expected to invigorate exchange between their respective nomadic culture and settled cultures and enrich research on Mongolian nomadic culture at this time when nomadism has become a focus of increased attention.

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