

# Local Food Movement in South Korea: the Current State and Issues<sup>1</sup>

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## I. Why local food in Korea and who are there?

Food has become an important social issue in South Korea (Korea hereafter), because of many food-related accidents such as melamine in Chinese food and US beef import liberalization to name a few. As a response to the potential risk of imported food vulnerable with food accidents, 'local food' has drawn quite a significant attention from the public. In recent years, different actors from the central government to local government to NGOs began to show great interest in local food. Local food, first introduced through mass media such as special documentaries in the national television, seemed to have gained legitimacy among policy makers as well as NGOs.

On the one side of popularity of local food exists the Korean consumers who have been concerned, worried, and angry because of many food related scandals. In May of 2008, president Lee Myung-bak agreed to open Korean beef market to the US producers, regardless of the age of cow and even SRM (specified risk material) such as skull. It is generally believed that age and part have some relationship with BSE or mad cow disease. Korean people were very worried and angry, which developed into massive candlelight vigil and street protests. The candlelight vigil lasted for more than 100 days and the brutal repression by the government turned off the candles at last. Yet, many consumers began to act and make changes in everyday lives of eating. The consumer coops, or Saenghyop in Korean, became very popular and the membership and sales grew sharply in recent years.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a draft paper prepared for 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of History of Sociologies, which will be held on December 19, 2010 at Korea University. Please do not cite.



On another side of local food lies Korean farmers, who have suffered from poverty and feeling of deprivation because of 50 years of Korean economic policy emphasizing manufacturing sector. The economic development and modernization process were based on the sacrifice of rural sector, providing cheap labor and food. Nowadays, young people are very few and many of those who are left in the farms do farming because

they have no other options. Under this difficult situation, some farmers have been building ties with consumer coops and NGOs which emphasized direct marketing. The farmers were able to acquire stable outlet for their products, mostly organic and environment-friendly grown. Organic farming in Korea was politically difficult because the repressive government in the 1970s strongly pushed for chemical and industrial farming under the name of 'modernization.' Very small number of farmers, most whom belonged to Jung-Nong Hoe (or Righteous Farming Group) with strong belief in agriculture as the basis of 'life,' continued to commit themselves in organic farming for the past 40 years. It was only in the 1990s, organic farming began to attract average farmers interest as the market for organic products grew as consumers were concerned about their health. Recently, organic food market grew rapidly and it is also becoming a part of big businesses such as Lotte Mart, E-Mart, and Home Plus (huge super-super market chains in Korea). Some farmers began to question this cooptation of organic farming into commercial circle and began to emphasize locality of food production and consumption. Agriculture related NGOs developed their ties with these farmers.

This brings us to the role of NGOs in local food movement. In criticizing the government agricultural policy emphasizing productivity and scale of farming, NGOs such as Korean Regional Development Foundation (KRDF) played an important role encouraging sustainable agriculture and community. The KRDF began to take local food movement from 2007 and have been an active advocate of local food movement. They provide education to the local leaders and organize regular forums. Some local NGOs involved in social enterprise showed great interest in local food as well around 2007 and 2008. For instance, Cheongju senior club has launched a small business of food preparation such as soybean sauce and kimchi. All-Lie, a social enterprise aimed at helping women, has become a successful business of soya burger, using locally grown organic soybean. Various local NGOs, not necessarily directly related with agriculture, began to take local food seriously as an important strategy for organizing local economy.

The Korean government, both central and local, began to show great interest in local food as well. As the President Lee Myung-bak emphasized 'green growth' as a new model of economic development in 2008, the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry(MIFAFF) has encouraged local food as good 'project' for green growth, promoting local economic development and reducing CO<sub>2</sub> by low food mileage. Some local governments were even more active. The governor of Seochon District encouraged his staff to find measures

to open farmers' market, food coop, and small business using local farm products. Other local governments of Wanju, Pyongtaek, and Naju also have implemented various measures to promote local food. In part, the interest in local food of the leaders of local government is political, using local food as a political brand to win the support of local people and prepare for the next election. In part, it is a response to the demand of local NGOs and experts who provided advices to the leaders as well as to the staffs of the local government.

Fianally, this brings us to the experts and scholars who have studied local food and tried to connect NGOs and governments. A research team was formed in 2006 under the name of 'local food system research group' in 2006. The group consisted of 8 scholars (including my self) who were sociologists, economists, anthropologist, and geographer. They has monthly seminar seeking alternatives to conventional agriculture and visited Japan to study Chisan-Chisho (locally produce and locally consume) of Hyogo prefecture. This field trip was very important because they have learned that something could be done concretely by working with NGOs and local governments. They have tried to study local food cases both foreign and domestic, theorize from cases, and make connection among NGO staffs and with scholars so they can share their experiences.

In 2009, 3 members of local food research group received a fairly big amount of research fund to study and evaluate the current state of local food movement in Korea. What they are doing is how the local food cases can be viewed from a sustainable food perspective. They have developed 5 indexes for assessing the sustainability of local food cases in Korea. The five indexes are social ties, locality, environmentality, safety, and welfarism<sup>2</sup>. By carrying out this research, they attempt to carefully examine where the Korean local food movement is now, especially because there have been some concerns that Korean local food movement has been institutionalized or co-opted by the local government and forgetting the spirit of the movement.

## II. Some Cases and Challenges

### 1. Farmers' Market

Farmers' market is an encounter of local farmers and consumer, reducing physical and social distance between them. Face-to-face meeting can play an important role in building a community. In the US, farmers' markets

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<sup>2</sup> 'welfarism' is meant to measure how local food contribute to the community, especially socially disadvantaged people. Some local food businesses are explicitly targeting lower class females where as some local food cases are rather exclusive and individualistic.

have increased very rapidly in recent years as the <Diagram 1> shows. In general, farmers' markets open on weekly bases such as on Saturday because farmers have something important to do, i.e. farming, than to sell at the market. Most US farmers' markets are voluntary form of civic agriculture (Lyson, 2004). It seems Japanese form of famers' markets has evolved with the assistance/intervention by the local government and agricultural coops. Japanese farmers' markets took the form of shop, arranged by agricultural coops or local government. Farmers would deliver the fresh produce, self-priced, everyday early in the morning to the shop. The shop, or they call it direct sales shop, usually sell on behalf of farmers charging 15-20 percent of fee. This way, the old farmers have stable outlet for their farm products and the consumers have the convenience of using a reliable shop.

<Figure 1> US farmers' markets



Source: USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, <http://www.ams.usda.gov>.



<Picture 1> Japanese Direct Sales Shop



<Picture 2> Korean Farmers' Market: Wonju



Korea is at its early stage in terms of farmers' markets. The most popular case is a farmers' market in Wonju, Kangwon province. Wonju farmers' market, or commonly called 'Dawn Market' as it opens from 4 to 9 o'clock in the morning, is celebrated as the most successful farmers' market in Korea. It first began in 1994 to help the small farmers and those who have returned to the land by Wonju city. The market opens every day from mid-April to early-December. The market is very strict in terms of who can sell their products. Only those who are registered residents of Wonju city can be members of 'Dawn Market Farmers Association,' which orchestrates various activities of the market. Currently, 520 Wonju farmers are members who pay an annual membership fee of 20,000 won (approximately 17 dollars) in addition to an initial joining fee of 40,000 won. The market has grown rapidly in recent years because of good quality and low prices of farm products. Therefore, not only individual consumers but also wholesalers and restaurant owners often come to buy fresh produce. It is estimated that annually 20,000 people visited the market with sales value amounting to 6.1 billion won, roughly 5 million US dollars. Mass media covered the success story several times and other local governments have tried to benchmark. Yet, there are some problems as well. The face-to-face relationships and solidarity among the participants do not develop. The farmers suffer from intense labor density as they happened to have two jobs, both of which are labor demanding. The researchers will evaluate Wonju farmers' market by using the criteria earlier mentioned, i.e., social ties, locality, environmental friendliness, safety, and welfare. There are other experiments of farmers' markets arranged by NGOs, including Cheong-ju and Cheong-won. According to a study done about this case, it is interesting to note that participating in the farmers' market improved farmers' pride in their farms and their interaction with other farmers (Yoon and Park, 2009).

## 2. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

From around 2007, CSA began to develop in Korea. Korean CSA can be classified into the following types: (1) individual farmer model: the farmer organizes a number of consumers in the city, (2) consumer coop supported model: pre-existing consumer coop arranges consumers and producers' organization, (3) producers' organization driven model: farmers' organization invites consumers or consumer group, (4) government arranged model: local government connects the consumers and producers. Comparatively speaking, Korean CSAs rely on social networks rather than geographical proximity and most consumers pay a monthly fee instead of an annual share. In

this respect, Korean CSA members do not fully share the risk of bad harvest as more progressive CSAs do in the US. In addition, the interaction between the consumers and producers are mostly through internet (Hur et al., 2010). One of the better cases of CSA in Korea is Bong-kang, Sangju (South eastern part of Korea). Currently, total of 14 farmers consisting of 12 females and 2 males participate in CSA with about 120 consumers in the city. The farm products include seasonal vegetables, herbs, tofu, eggs, kimchi, and soy sauce. The member farmers learned that growing diverse crops in small amount (small quantity batch production) instead of monoculture can be economically viable. As both farmers and consumers began to realize the importance of sustainable food and agriculture, the farmers began to plant local seeds, which was supported by participating consumers. The consumers learned about diverse seasonal vegetables and herbs, which changed their food consumption behavior. Bong-kang CSA is regarded as the most successful case of CSA in Korea, building a community based on food and trust (Hur et al., 2010).

### 3. Consumer Coops (Saenghyop)

Consumer coops have played a very important and unique role in Korea in promoting organic food and providing alternatives to concerned consumers. The first consumer coop is Hansalim, which begun in mid-1980s with the slogan of "farmers will take care of the consumers' life while the consumers will take care of the livelihood of farmers." When it was first established, Hansalim emphasized ecological awakening and communitarian awareness, aiming to be more than just consumer coop. Yet, as the organization grew with more members concerned with their individual health and safe food, Hansalim has been facing a dilemma as initial emphasis on alternative values have been diluted. In addition, other coops joined the organic food market which led Hansalim to become more aggressive in rationalizing its business including introducing centralized supply system. In this process, Hansalim and other big coops became somewhat detached from local connections, only emphasizing organic products. To make the things worse, large supermarkets and specialized shops dealing organic food also joined the completion, leading to a stagnation of consumer coops. The US beef incident of 2008 radically changed the situation. Many consumers began to rethink about the food safety and the trust became an issue. Consumer coops, compared to large supermarkets, were regarded as much reliable and transparent. The number of new members as well as sales increased by leaps and bounds as <Table 1>



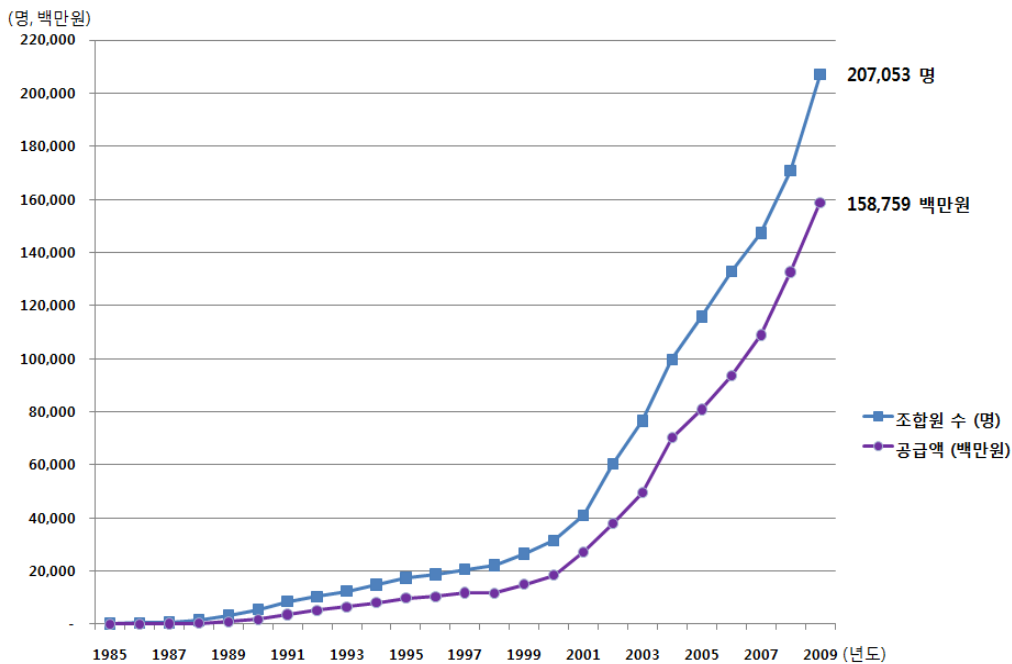
shows.

<Table 1> The Sales and Membership of Consumer Coops: 2008-2010

Coops		2008(a)	2009(b)	2010(c)	Rate of increase	
					b/a	c/b
Sales (million won)	Hansalim	133,437	159,442	190,940	19.5	19.8
	iCOOP	130,150	205,300	280,000	57.7	36.4
	Doore	40,554	55,583	70,260	37.1	26.4
	Minwoohoe	11,338	15,367	20,529	35.5	33.6
	others	23,839	28,360	33,548	19.0	18.3
	TOTAL	339,318	464,052	595,277	36.8	28.3
Membership (number)	Hansalim	170,793	207,053	242,916	21.2	17.3
	iCOOP	54,600 (34,987)	78,593 (56,100)	110,000 (80,000)	43.9 (60.4)	40.0 (42.6)
	Doore	48,390	66,617	85,000	37.7	27.6
	Minwoohoe	17,187	19,579	24,900	13.9	27.2
	Others	37,420	43,150	49,620	15.0	15.3
	TOTAL	328,390	414,992	512,436	26.4	23.5

Source: Cho, Wanhyong. 2010.

<Figure 2> Increase of Membership and Sales of Hansalim: 1985-2009



Consumer coops are at the crossroad. The talk about a crisis in double-senses. On the one hand, the membership growth is stagnating in recent months. On the other hand, they are becoming like any other supermarkets. While both discourses of crises are somewhat exaggerated, now is certainly an important turning point for the future direction. Hansalim seemed to take the second diagnosis of crisis seriously and is trying to re-establish itself as an organization with values and become part of local food movement. It has launched a program called 'eating food from near movement' from 2009. In contrast, iCOOP think the first crisis is more significant one and is becoming more aggressive in increasing asset by collecting more investment from members. They even run radio advertisement to compete with supermarkets. Local food is not regarded as important by iCOOP, which attempt to rationalize the business.

Whether the consumer coops can incorporate the spirit of local food in their business, and, if they did, how successful they could be are important questions to be studied in the future.

### III. Issues

What is 'local?' There has been a lot of discussion about how far is local. Is it half-day driving distance, 30 miles, or 100 miles? Some staffs of consumer coops have argued that local food is irrelevant in Korea since it is such a

small country. In addition, since one third of Koreans live in Seoul metro area, it is argued, farmers in remote area cannot make their living by relying on small local market. Another difficult issue related with local is local government's exclusive definition based on administrative boundaries. There have been competition among local governments in building local food system, defining local as a particular district or municipality.

Who are to organize? If we need farmers' markets or CSAs, someone has to organize. Self-organizing has been somewhat stagnant because especially the farmers are aged and accustomed to conventional farming based on rice. Then should the local government and NGOs intervene? To what extent? Can they self-sustaining?

What is the role of scholars? Some scholars have been importing, introducing, and spreading the idea of local food. Some have been working closely with the leaders of local government believing that they are doing good to the community. Some have strongly encouraged the NGOs to add local food to their agenda. Often these processes themselves have become research topics. Are these legitimate roles of academia? They have been presenting local food

To what extent should it be institutionalized? Comparatively speaking, Korean local food movement has become overly institutionalized, as the main actor has been the local and central government. Often, local people are not visible as the government agencies play too much role. Is this a movement? Can this be sustainable?