

Koreaphiles' Guide

If its *ching chung*, it's got to be good, but *wonjo* Italiano . . . in Korea?

Chef's special



DO your tastes run to 'original' foodstuffs? What I mean is, will you particularly favour restaurants that show *ching chung* (正宗), or *zheng zong* in Mandarin, on their signboards? The Chinese term means 'authentic' and, in this case, it indicates that the foods are, indeed, original with no additives or flavour enhancers. However, there are a thousand-and-one restaurants tagged with the word 'original' . . . and so you may wonder why they do this even if their offerings may not be totally authentic, writes Catherine Chan.

IF YOU take this *ching chung* thing seriously, be cautious when visiting restaurants in Korea. That's because you are likely to be confused by the sight of so many 'original' restaurants. Indeed, 'Original Indian', 'Original Chinese', 'Original Italian' and, of course, 'Original Korean' food outlets abound. The latter usually stress their originality by putting the word *wonjo* (元祖) before their shop name.

Those who can read and understand Chinese will immediately realise that *wonjo* means 'first ancestor' and, in this case, refers to a family-run restaurant with a secret recipe invented by those who have passed on.

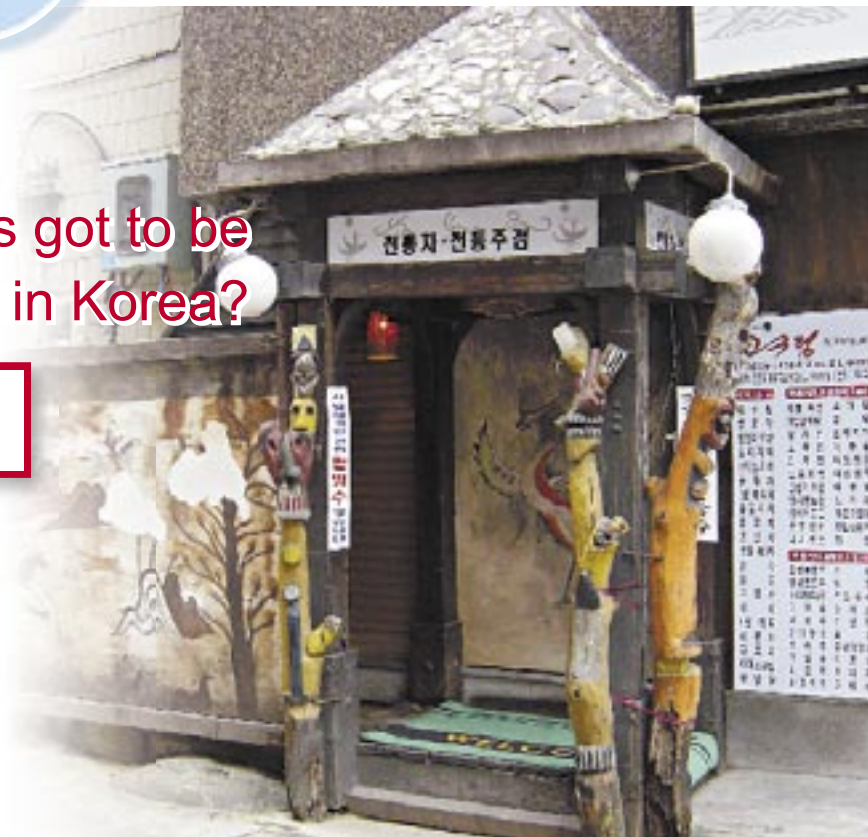
Do you remember Sindang-dong (新堂洞), a popular area for Korean traditional food such as *tteokboki* (see *Koreaphiles' Guide*, August 17, 2005). This street is renowned for its *tteokboki*, as it is the centre for the shops that sell this kind of spicy rice-cake. Well, perhaps I should restate that – it is where most of the restaurants for 'original' *tteokboki* are located.

A matter of 'proof'

More than half of all restaurants here claim that their *tteokboki* is original. You will see 'real original,' '*wonjo* original' or sometime even 'real *wonjo* original' in front of the restaurant's name.

Perhaps such a **superabundance** of *wonjo* restaurants has made the proprietors **conjure up** such **superfluous** wording; in fact many of them place photos of old, long forgotten or late **lamented** chefs next to the eatery's name to 'prove' to their **clientele** that: "Look, see – our food is 'original' and here is the evidence!"

So, all in all, why do Koreans care so much about *wonjo* and originality?



It probably has something to do with their personality. According to some 'experts', Koreans are categorised as a group of absolute **orthodoxy** – while trying to stress 'originality'.

For instance, Koreans treasure their **genealogy**, which is an extremely important part of their existence. Such **reverence** for ancestry is usually reserved for just a few aristocratic remnants of noble families in other countries.

Stick with your own

In Korea, however, it goes much farther. Even ordinary people must possess a treasured knowledge of family, their own *Who's Who*, where they come from, although not necessarily an absolute understanding of where they are going . . .

Koreans have long rejected intermarriage, in fact since ancient times. This might give a clue to their habit of subconscious orthodoxy. Also, in ancient Korean kingdoms – and the similarity to China here is obvious – the throne and subsequent dynasty was determined by the first prince.

As for the king's children who were not born to his official wife, they were not only unable to receive the title 'prince', but were also forbidden to call their monarch 'father'.

This resulted in **perennial** conflict and violence, palace **coups**, **monarchical** challenges, clampdowns and rebuffs. Imagine the first prince, who needn't do anything with his life except wait to be elevated to the throne while another, born to a concubine, could never aspire to kingship, no matter how much potential he possessed.

The 'original' syndrome

In the modern world, orthodoxy appears in everyday life as well. A student who is enrolled in a prominent school by referral or relationship, but not through the official examination system, could possibly wind up being boycotted by his schoolmates. This is because it simply goes against the concept or **hand-me-down** habit of 'originality'. This 'syndrome', call it what you will, applies in the work place as well.

So, what is the point of tagging everything as 'original'? Well, the word *wonjo* may guarantee tradition and orthodoxy. It may also be symptomatic of simple, wishful thinking.

Writer's note

The other day, I read a book about this 'original' mania – a phenomenon that may not only be confined to Korean restaurateurs – and I found something really interesting: There is a restaurant owner who conjured up a trademark for her place a decade ago and, of course, the title embraces the word *wonjo*. The woman whined that there were so many restaurants that pilfered her shop name but, sadly, she said she was unable to bring the 'copycats' to justice. How come? Simply because there are hundreds of eateries nationwide with exactly the same name.

*Big word(s)

Glossary

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|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. authentic (adj. 真正的) | 4. superabundance (n. 大量; 過多) | 7. lamented (adj. 被悼念的) | 10. genealogy (n. 家譜) | 13. coup (n. 政變) |
| 2. additive (n. 添加劑; 添加物) | 5. conjure up (phr. v. 想起) | 8. clientele (n. 顧客) | 11. reverence (n. 崇敬) | 14. monarchical (adj. 君主政體的) |
| 3. enhancer (n. 增加) | 6. superfluous (adj. 多餘的; 不必要的) | 9. orthodoxy (n. 正統) | 12. perennial (adj. 長期的; 反覆的) | 15. hand-me-down (n. 家人或親戚傳下來的東西) |