

Korean Café Culture: What Korean Cafés Mean to Koreans

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As a tiny, racially homogenous country, Korea holds over 49 million people in a piece of land a little larger than Indiana. Although the country is small, there are a great number of cafés. The rapid growth of café market in Korea makes the number of cafes impossible to be accurately measured. However, according to Seoul Cyber Enterprise Exhibition website, there were approximately 800 cafés in Korea's capital city Seoul in 2004. By 2011, there were 12,381 cafés in Korea; this is 54% increase in the number compared to the number of cafés in the previous year. Moreover, Korea has some of world's biggest coffee shops owned by foreign corporate chains, such as a three-story-tall Pascucci in Sinchon and a four-story-tall Starbucks in Myeongdong.¹ There are not only a large number of cafés but also a lot of people who like to go to cafés. According to the survey conducted by Starbucks Korea and Food Therapy Association in 2009, 41.8% of 19,470 respondents answered that they visit cafés 3~4 times per week. Since cafés' main consumers became students and young adults in 1990s, the diverse range of cafés is concentrated around college areas.

This rapid growth of the number of cafés in Korea despite the fact that cafés are not indigenous to the country not only shows the size of café business in Korea but also indicates how much affection Koreans feel towards cafés and how passionately they have created their own café culture. After living in Korea, Canada, and the U.S., I noticed several distinctive features of Korean café culture. Then, I became curious about when cafés began to exist in Korea and how Koreans are consuming the café culture today. In this paper, I share my anthropological research and fieldwork results about Korean café culture. Using the information about the history, diversity, and general characteristics of Korean cafés, I try to investigate what meanings cafés in Korea have to Koreans.

Current trend and types of cafés in Korea

In Korea, the words cafés and coffee shops can be used interchangeably. There are various cafés, which are not common to find in other parts of the world. They range from "wedding café" to "tarot café".² In "board game cafés", customers can pay an

¹ Sinchon is a neighborhood of Seodaemun-gu district in Seoul. Because Sinchon has a lot of Korea's top universities, such as Yonsei University, Ehwa Woman's University, Sogang University, and Hongik University, there are a lot of shopping areas and restaurants targeting college students. Myeongdong is a neighborhood of a district called Jung-gu in Seoul. It is a mecca for shopping among both Koreans and foreigners.

² Wedding cafés are basically a combination of a studio and a coffee shop. They offer certain building structures with stylish decorations so that customers can use these as a background when they take pictures with boyfriends and girlfriends. For example, there are beautifully decorated walls and terraces filled with fashionable furniture. Usually couples visit wedding cafés, and they can rent tuxedos and dresses there. In tarot cafés, fortunetellers use tarot cards to "foretell" customers' future of love and career.

hourly fee and play over 50 different board games with friends, selecting penalty items and drinking kiwi smoothie.³ Cat lovers can visit “kitty cafés” where they can pet and play with various types of cats while they chat with their family and lovers drinking a cup of green tea latte. Korean corporate chains offer fusion beverages, such as black bean latte, with an indoor smoking area whereas small cafés around colleges entertain young adults with their cute, thematic interior designs. The kinds of food offered at cafés are also diverse. Several types of coffee, like Americano, Café Latte, and Café Mocha, are on the menu as basic beverages in addition to non-coffee beverages and desserts.

Based on the services cafés offer, I categorize Korean cafés into four types: systemized cafés, franchise cafés, theme cafés, and cute cafés. Systemized cafés have certain systems that give customers different options of the amount of payment and offer different types of services included in the payment. For instance, some systemized cafes have a rule that each customer must order at least one item; however, the payment includes services, such as one piece of cheesecake on weekdays, blankets for female customers wearing skirts, and unlimited self-servings of bread. Franchise cafés resemble foreign corporate chains, like Starbucks. But despite similarities, they still express their Korean-ness through their own menu, interior design, and target of consumers. Some of franchise cafés may overlap with some systemized cafes, but franchise cafés remain fairly different from systemized ones because they do not have a set of payment options and corresponding services. The third type – theme cafés – is designed around particular themes. One interesting characteristic of this category is that theme cafés focus primarily on providing certain thematic activities rather than selling beverages and desserts. Examples include comic book cafés, puzzle cafés, and multi-room cafés that offer many activity items – such as TV, computer, board games, and Wii – in one room. Lastly, “agijagi” cafés – meaning cute and small cafés – are private-owned, and highly decorated. As a result, cute cafés tend to be romantic. Decoration items and menu usually reflect the artistic taste of the owner.

For my fieldwork, I picked four cafés – Minto, Caffebene, Elpis, and Raintree for each type of cafés – in the metropolitan area of Seoul that represent the four categories of Korean cafés. As I conducted participant-observation, I noticed patterns in services, customer types, consumer behaviors, and atmospheres distinctive to each of the cafés. Over all, the differences between these cafés reveal the diversity in Korean café culture.

Research questions and methods

What are Korean cafés like today? How do Koreans use cafés, and what do they pursue at cafés of Korean society? In order to answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic research about Korean café culture. Through a three-week-long fieldwork in Korea and five months of research, I tried to figure out what Korean cafés mean to Koreans.

Conducted in December 2011, my fieldwork took place in the four different types of Korean cafés in the metropolitan area of Seoul over a three-week-long time span. As I stayed in each café for two hours everyday for sixteen days, I participated in the café culture, observed how and what Koreans consume at cafés and also conducted nine interviews. After coming back to the U.S., I then conducted two more interviews and

³ Board game cafés offer various board games and snacks. Penalty items refer to the objects – such as a funky wig and a horse mask – used as a penalty on losers in a game.

discovered more information about Korean cafés. I also confirmed cultural patterns seen in my interviews through statistical research.

In this paper, I explore the history of Korean cafés, various types of them, general characteristics of cafés, and possible explanations for diversity of café culture in Korea to answer the main research question, “what do Korean cafés mean to Koreans?”. The significance of my research question lies in the understanding of the influence of globalization and the power of cultural hybridization. Since the arrival of café culture, going to cafés has been a romantic activity to Korean people. Visiting a café before or after a meal has become a habit of Koreans. This is interesting because cafés are not indigenous to Korean society; nevertheless, café culture from the world converged with local culture of Korea. As a result, Korea’s own distinctive version was born. My ethnography will introduce interesting cultural aspects of Korean café culture to anyone who is interested in café culture or Korean culture. The first step to take to enter the Korean cafés is to understand how the café ended up in Korea a century ago.

How café culture arrived in Korea

Coffee shops originated from the Islamic world due to coffee’s substitution for alcohol in the 15th century and later spread to Austria, Italy, and England in 1600s. When introduced to Europe, the coffee shops were called “café”. Now anywhere in the world, “café” refers to a place focusing on serving coffee and even some snacks in some cultures. Since the first European café opened in Vienna, coffee and cafés have been associated with the West. When cafés began a journey from the Arabian culture and made its way to Europe and North America and then to Korea, probably nobody expected the outcome of an interesting combination of the “Western culture” and Korean culture of the East.

History of the café in Korea

Coffee does not grow in Korea. Junman Kang’s *King Gojong goes to Starbucks* states that King Gojong was the first person to taste coffee in Korea. In 1896, Antoinette Sontag, the sister-in-law of a Russian ambassador, treated the king to a cup of coffee. Coffee was a beverage of wonder to Koreans, who were always curious about foreign cultures due largely to Korea’s homogenous culture. Because coffee came from the West and resembled Asian herbal medicine that only the rich could afford, it was consumed as a symbol of westernization and modernization. In the early days, people called coffee shops or cafés “dabangs”.

The very first *dabang* in Korea was built by Sontag in 1902. After the Japanese colonization of Korea (1910-1945) ended, the Japanese built teahouses in Myeongdong and sold coffee there. The modern type of *dabangs* dates from 1927 in Myeongdong and were spread to Jongno and Chungmuro.⁴ At first *dabangs* were open to the royal family and people in high positions and later were used as politicians’ hall, artists’ headquarters, and businessmen’s meeting place. Koreans were fascinated by *dabang* because they enjoyed the practice of drinking coffee in *dabang* atmosphere; it was a great pleasure to experience using forks to have cake and drinking coffee in a teacup instead of using chopsticks to eat kimchi and drinking Korean traditional soup out of a bowl.

In mid-1900, *dabangs* continued to exist as a meeting place rather than as a place where people could drink coffee; however, it was not the time for ordinary citizens to

⁴ Jongno is one of the oldest east-west thoroughfares in Seoul. Chungmuro is a street of culture and art in Seoul.

consume coffee yet due to the high price. Before the introduction of coffee shops, people in high positions often held meetings at *kisaeng* houses while commoners hung out at *jumaks* to talk about their lives and politics.⁵ Since *dabang* was the center of debates about politics, economy, culture, education, art, and religion by people of different professions, the Korean government strictly restricted individuals' visit to *dabangs*. In that sense, Korean cafés in 1950s were very similar to Parisian cafés in the late seventeenth century when the “police [had] closely watched cafés” due to the cafés' function as social institutions (Haine 1992, 608).

In the 1960s, the value of coffee skyrocketed because coffee was prohibited from *dabangs* due to the movement of using domestic products after dictator President Park's 5.16 military coup d'état in 1961. However, *dabangs* in general became more open to middle class citizens in 1960s. Although *dabangs* were still for adults only, it became a popular dating place for young men and women.

The first Korean theme café was probably a music *dabang* in the 1970s. This type of *dabang* had DJs who received song requests from customers and played record music for them. It provided a feeling of freedom to college students who could not express their political opinions openly in 1970s.

As the competition amongst *dabangs* increased in the 1980s, they decorated themselves with distinctive items, such as pink lights and indoor waterfalls, to survive in the increasingly crowded marketplace. At this time of the century, *dabangs* underwent huge changes in terms of their atmosphere and menu. For example, dark *dabangs* with dividers to block others' view changed into the ones with bright and cozier atmospheres. This new type of coffee shops, which called themselves cafés to distinguish themselves from old style *dabangs*, began to focus on different kinds of coffee instead of selling traditional teas and sodas.

In 1990s, people thought that consumption, too, had a style so preferred cafés with a neater interior design and professionalism in coffee. And then there was a huge shift in Korean café culture's history in 1999 when Starbucks, the first foreign franchise coffee shop in Korea, was established in Sinchon, Seoul. Starbucks introduced Korea to a new café culture, such as take-out and self-service system without good-looking waitresses and staying at a café alone reading a book or doing homework. Since then, more foreign franchise coffee shops entered the market with a greater variety of coffee and atmospheres, and more local franchise cafés and small private-owned cafés appeared with their unique features.

Diversity of Korean café culture: fieldwork at the four cafés

Systemized Café: Minto

Minto, called “Mindeulle Yeongto” in Korean, was founded by Seungryong Ji in 1993. After staying at a café for a few hours with one cup of coffee one day, Ji sensed an unwelcoming stare from the café owner. At that time, he decided to establish a teahouse-like café with a warm environment so that customers can comfortably stay in a café for a long time regardless of the number of orders. Currently, there are sixteen Minto cafés in Korea.

⁵ Kisaeng houses, whose peak moment was in Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), had female entertainers serving male customers of high class. Jumak refers to a Korean traditional bar and inn that offered alcoholic beverages, food, and lodging to commoners in Joseon Dynasty.

The one I visited is in Ilsan, a city technically not in Seoul but definitely in the metropolitan area of Seoul. Located in a big building in a shopping mall area, Minto caught pedestrians' attentions with its unique cylinder-like appearance and a huge eagle statue on the roof. As soon as I entered the café on the second floor, the female employees in pink dresses greeted me and led me to one of the window booths.



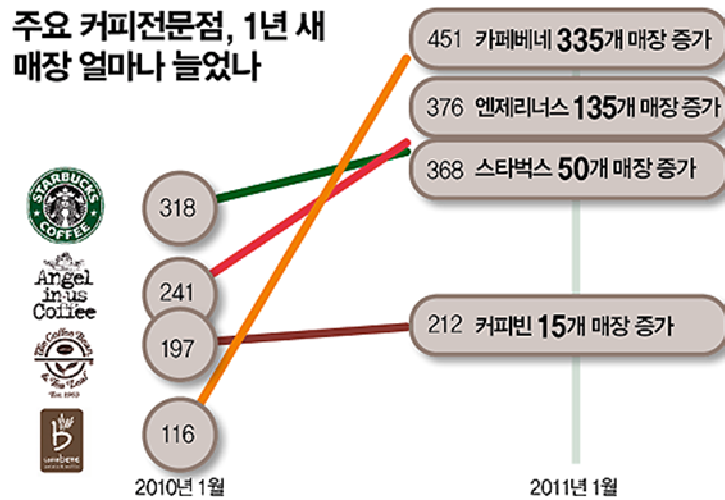
Overall, Minto in Ilsan was filled with emerald, grey, and brown colors. The small yellow lights shone brick columns, wooden tables booths around the window, and turquoise blue and red velvet cushion chairs in the center. The open center with two floors of seats surrounding it and a big circular ceiling gave a giant hut-like feeling. However, the neat arrangement of different kinds of seats, stylish furniture, a grand piano and a drum set in the center, and wall paintings gave Minto a modern look as well.

All Minto cafés are run under one system. That is upon the entrance, each customer needs to choose either to order at least one item – the price ranges from approximately \$5.50 to \$70 – or to pay a basic “culture fee” \$5 that includes unlimited servings of coffee, fifteen teas, and eleven sodas, maximum two servings of twenty nutritional teas, and one serving of a cup noodle or a piece of bread. With the basic culture fee, individuals can stay at Minto for three hours and maximum four and a half hours with the payment of seventy cents additional charges every thirty minutes after the first three hours. Moreover, a few desktops, seminar rooms, comic books, a magazine stand and free wifi service are available to all Minto customers. As a result, the cheap and convenient basic fee system, along with nice facilities and a cozy ambience, attract a lot of middle school and high school students. Despite the fact that Minto in Ilsan is surrounded by many schools, there were a lot of customers in their twenties, thirties, and forties. They were mostly couples and company workers around the building who visited Minto for group lunch or dinner. Those who do not choose the basic culture fee have a greater set of food options. Minto sells not only traditional teas and ades, but also various kinds of coffee, smoothies, ice cream, alcohol, pasta, Korean dishes, and even steaks. Table bells, like in ordinary Korean restaurants, enable the customers to freely call the café employees anytime they want to order more food or need help with using air-conditioners or heaters attached to each booth. Since there is no tip culture in Korea, the unconditional kindness of the waiters and waitresses there pleased me very much every time I visited Minto. As I did participant-observation at Minto at different times of day, I noticed that the majority of people visited Minto as groups around dinner and lunch times. Couples were watching movies on their laptops while female friend groups were chatting. Some adults seemed to hold company group meetings in the center seat as a group of two young women were studying in a booth at the corner.

Based on my previous experience with another Minto café in front of two colleges in Sinchon, the core of Seoul, Minto cafés vary depending on where they are located. While Minto of Ilsan is very quiet, dark, and not so crowded, Minto of Sinchon is four stories tall and usually full of college students. Also Sinchon’s Minto has its own movie theater in the basement and has a bright atmosphere due to the white furniture.

Overall, Minto’s well-trained employees are so kind, the interior design so luxurious, and the variety of menu so great that it feels to be a waste of time to work or drink a cup of coffee at Minto alone. However, for those who want to study alone or chat as a small group, the next type of café seems to be a better choice.

Franchise Café: Caffebene



▲ The growth of four big corporate café chains in Korea in one year (Starbucks, Angelinus, Coffee Beans, Caffebene)

Caffebene, a Korean corporate chain café, can be called Starbucks of Korea because of its rapid growth; it grew from one franchise in 2008 to over 550 franchises in 2011 outnumbering all other domestic and foreign franchises. CEO Seonkwon Kim introduced Caffebene to the extremely highly competitive café market of Korea in 2008 as he dreamt to ignite “the spark of cultural and historical revolutions, like the European cafés from the mid-17th century where many intellectuals and artists gathered to inspire one another” [SIC] (Caffebene website). As a result, the strong emphasis on the European style café is reflected on both the interior design and the menu. All Caffebene cafés, including the one in Ilsan where I visited for my fieldwork, are decorated with grey walls, wooden chairs and tables, a tree in the middle, and a giant European style clock in a smoking area. The floor-to-ceiling window allows as much sunlight as possible to keep the inside bright. Also the take-out culture and the self-service order and pick-up remind



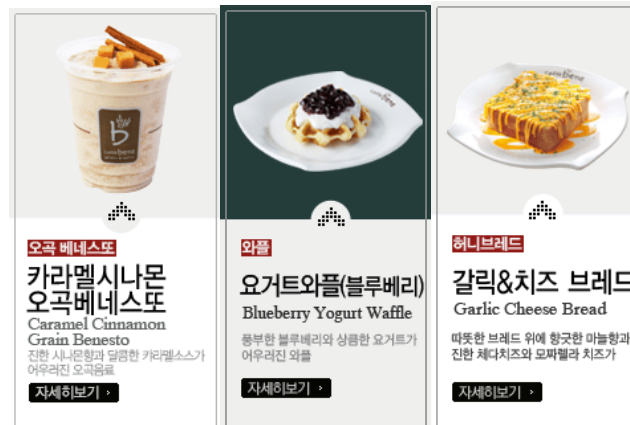
one of Starbucks, which gives a western style café-like feel to the overall atmosphere. Caffebene’s menu includes Belgian waffles, Italian gelato, and several types of European beverages that are difficult to pronounce – for instance, “Vin-chaud”.

Caffebene is a typical self-service franchise kind of café. In one sense, it can be considered to be “impolite” to customers because it makes them move. Unlike in Minto, there was no employee in a uniform greeting me and serving me when I entered Caffebene in Ilsan. I had to walk to the counter, order my beverage, and picked a seat all by myself. A few minutes later when a notification device vibrated to notify me that my order was ready at the “Pick-up” counter, I walked up to the counter trusting that nobody would touch my stuff while I was gone.

Although there was no extra service, the general ambience of Caffebene was very pleasant. The brown and grey decorations looked simple while small lights hanging on the tree and some pictures of Caffebene volunteer teams to Africa on the wall added highlights to the simplicity. The seats in the smoking area were separated from the non-smoking area by glass walls. However, they coexisted with the other seats by still being inside the café, and having the Caffebene’s symbolic clock decoration connected this area to the rest of the space. Overall, green from the tree and brown from the seats made me feel like I was resting in a forest. If I faced the glass wall, however, the city’s pedestrians and a Mac computer – which is not common to find in Korea – gave a modern look to Caffebene.

During the four times I visited Caffebene, I noticed that most customers were either talking to one or two companions or working alone. Exotic European and fusion beverages, such as Chocolat-chaud and Caramel Cinnamon Grain Benesto, that are unique to Caffebene act like pleasing shackles that keep many customers away from other franchise cafés. Interesting desserts, like Blueberry Yogurt Waffle and Garlic Cheese Honey Bread, draw customers into Caffebene and enable them to have a chat for longer time. Although people did not seem to visit Caffebene for lunch or dinner as in Minto’s case, Caffebene’s desserts were big enough to satisfy customers’ small hunger for snacks in the middle of day. As a result, Caffebene in Ilsan began to be about 80% full from after lunchtime. Compared to Minto, Caffebene was usually noisy because of many small groups chatting. Most people were couples, under-aged students, and women in their twenties.⁶ Since the café was located in a residential area, mid-aged men and women also showed up time to time. Despite the small, open space, the seating arrangement and noise from conversations seemed to create invisible dividers between groups so that the customers could chat without feeling overheard or disrupted too much.

⁶ The word “under-aged students” refers to the students who are under the age of 19 and so are identified as non-adults in Korea.



Based on my observation and experience at the café, Caffebene could be considered to be a good place to visit with a small number of friends to have a chat. Moreover, considering that Koreans tend to do most activities – going to restaurants or cafés, for example – with somebody, I did not feel too lonely or awkward to go there alone due to its western style atmosphere. Nevertheless, some individuals do not prefer franchise cafés. Luckily in Korea, they still have another option, which is called theme cafés.

Theme Café: Elpis

Elpis is a “study café” where people can read books, do their assignments, and work on team projects. Located in a church in front of Yonsei University in Sinchon, Elpis has “studying” as its theme. It is run by Changchun Church for college students who need cheap beverages and enough space to have group meetings.

Like Caffebene and Minto, Elpis is a self-service café; however, it felt different from Minto or Caffebene because of its clear theme. Except the Christmas tree in the center and a piano in the corner, there was not much decoration. Single seats in front of the window, booths for four people, long wooden tables for a large number of users, bright white lights, and bookshelves covering one entire wall reminded me of a library. At the same time, however, it felt more comfortable and relaxing than a library because the café portion of Elpis created an environment where people could talk.



Some elderly ladies from the church, and office workers near the café often came, but most people visiting Elpis were college students. They were working either alone or as a group. Some of them brought international students to talk about Korean culture. The students enjoyed two desktop computers next to the bookshelves and the seminar rooms of different sizes available separately on the fourth floor. The free wifi service with a

password guaranteed decent quality Internet access. Unlike the customers at Minto and Caffebene, those at Elpis definitely did not visit the café to enjoy coffee or other special beverages or chat with their friends. Although the coupon system that enabled me to have one beverage free after collecting twelve stamps on an Elpis card made me want to come back to the café, I felt that I would want to visit Elpis again only when I wanted to work. The menu consisted of relatively cheap but basic beverages, such as Americano, Café Mocha, and Green Tea Latte. Desserts, too, were simple sandwiches and plain waffles. There were absolutely no couples. In fact, there was even a sign that said “No intense physical contacts please”. In many ways, it was clear that the services and customers in Elpis existed for studying.

Elpis the study café is just one of many theme cafés. Along the same line are “hand-drip coffee café” where individuals interested in tasting authentic coffee can enjoy a cup of coffee made by an award-winning barista, “doll-making café”, “puppy café”, “Xbox café”, and many more. They provide interesting activities, which are too expensive or difficult to experience if pursued separately elsewhere. Because of this, the main event at theme cafés is something beyond just drinking coffee or chatting with others. The interior design, services, and the type of customers all depend on the theme of each café. Also the way each café charges customers depends on time span, materials used, and themes offered.

Cute Café: Raintree

Raintree is a typical cute café. It is a very small café located on the second floor of one of the buildings in front of Ehwa Women’s University in Sinchon. After traveling around the world, the two owners of the café built Raintree with a theme of “journey”.

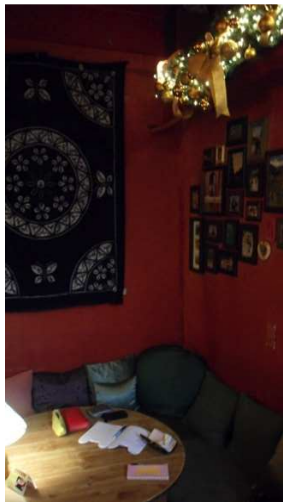
From the store sign at the entrance to a saucer, everything in Raintree world is meticulously decorated. When I was wandering around blocks of buildings in Sinchon to look for Raintree, I could spot this tiny café easily once I was on the right street because of its hand-written menu board and directions on wooden planks sticking out to lure passersby to the narrow staircase leading up to the second floor. The moment I opened the door, I felt as if I entered a whole new world. The entire room was painted in red, and there were red and white see-through curtains draping down to divide the six tables. When I was still looking around the café, the owner led me to a floor seat at the corner and gave me some time to take a look at the hand-written menu.⁷ After ordering Apple & Cinnamon Tea, I spent more time to explore the café. The walls were covered with the



⁷ In Korea, there are many Korean restaurants and some cafés that offer floor seats. People need to take off their shoes before entering the floor so that they can sit crossed-legged on the floor.

pictures which the owner had taken while traveling around the world. Along with the world map and several antique-looking pieces of furniture from foreign countries, the two dark yellow lights that I had never seen before altogether created an Aladdin palace-like appearance. After taking a seat, I began to have more interest in the environment around me. Including the one I was sitting in, four of the six seats in the café were in the Korean traditional form where I had to take off my shoes to enter the floor and sat down on the floor. Eight colorful cushions were surrounding me while I was enjoying the heat mat beneath me.

When my friend and I got our beverages, I noticed that the different beverages came out in different shapes of cups and saucers. All of the beverages and sandwiches on the menu were relatively expensive compared to other cafés, but various flags next to the food items which showed the countries of their origins made me want to come back again and again to try other foreign desserts. My exploration of Raintree's decorations was endless. I found more and more objects as I kept visiting Raintree. For example, while waiting for my friend at the café, I discovered a pile of albums next to my table that contain the photos of the owners' journey in different countries. When I took the regular table seat another day, I noticed that the table was covered with the tickets and maps the owners had bought during their trips. The most interesting aspect of the café was the role of the curtains. In addition to a lot of other decorative items that contribute to creating the exotic atmosphere, the curtains give privacy to each table. Because of this reason, couples at Raintree were more active in terms of having physical contact with partners. For instance, they sat next to each other instead of across from each other even though doing so is considered to be "too much" in Korea. There were more hugs and kisses among the couples in Raintree than in other types of cafés. Almost as a cycle, these actions seemed to contribute to making the ambience more exotic and distinct.



Due to the location and the characteristics of the café, most customers to Raintree were women in their twenties. Even though sometimes, young men seemed to have been dragged to the café by their girlfriends, it was usually college girls and young female company workers who visited Raintree to chat with friends. Nobody came alone or came to study. According the owner, people start coming from 2 O' clock after lunchtime, and 90% of the customers stay at the café instead of ordering beverages for take-out.

For cute cafés, like Raintree, the ambience is the major selling point. Depending on the intention of the owner, the structure and decorations of cafés might vary. For

example, another travel-themed café has a small baby blue color bus and some Polaroid pictures hanging on the wall to trigger the image of “travel”. I have also seen a café that tries to express its cuteness through the walls of pastel-tone colors and interesting looking teacups. Nevertheless, cute cafés generally stay small and pretty. They never exist as chain cafés, so people get to know this type of cafés through close friends or an intense research on the Internet.

General characteristics of Korean café culture

Based on my interviews and observation at the four cafes, several characteristics that are generally distinct to Korean café culture can be found. First of all, the main consumers of Korean café culture are women in their twenties. Men in Korea do not participate in the culture of drinking coffee and talking to each other because they usually talk over alcohol or while playing sports. On the other hand, women are attracted to cafés’ cute interior design. Franchise cafés in residential areas are frequented by mid-aged women for casual meetings while the ones in metropolitan areas are visited by young men time to time. Nevertheless, young women dominate all types of cafés – especially, theme cafés and cute cafés. According to Raintree’s owner, 70% of Raintree’s customers are female college students. Interviewee 5, who is in her fifties, testified that the way most cafés these days are decorated is adjusted to young adults’ tastes, and activities available at cafés are also based on the trend popular among young people. So she feels as though there is no place for elders to gather and have fun like the young do at cafés. Related to the feminine characteristic of the café culture, the experience Interviewee 10 had recently is an interesting one.

When I suggest my [male] friends chatting at a café, the response that comes back to me is “Am I your girlfriend?”. I personally like going to cafés. [...] Even when I pick something from the menu at a restaurant, if I ask if we should have spaghetti, they ask me the same question. So the act of going to a western restaurant seemed to be limited to a tool to use for a date. It was very surprising and strange. Maybe it’s because I go to a college here [the U.S.], but I could notice that Korean college students have that kind of stereotypes when I talked to them.

Interviewee 10

Interviewee 10 is a Korean male college student who goes to college in the U.S. To my question that asked what kind of place a café is, he responded that it is a place where women or couples meet. As the interview with him suggests, pretty decorations and exotic beverages of Korean cafés reflect girls’ taste so much that anything related to cafés – including sitting in one of those cafés, chatting or eating desserts inside cafés, or even liking cafés itself – is considered to be a feminine activity. However, this does not mean that Korean men are reluctant to enter cafés. They wait for their friends or do work at cafés just as women do yet probably thinking that consuming the café culture with guys is a little awkward behavior.

Although the word “café” generally means a place serving coffee, Korean cafés are concerned with other factors besides coffee. One of the elements is non-coffee beverages and desserts. Except theme cafés, where customers care more about the activities than the food offered there, most cafés boast their own unique menu as a way to

set them apart in the saturated Korean café market. For example, Minto has an herbal tea called “Minto Tea”. Raintree also offer authentic homemade beverages whereas Caffebene attracts customers with various kinds of waffles and seasonal desserts.

All Korean cafés invest a lot in decorations regardless of types. Creating a decent ambience is a key to success since atmosphere plays a significant role when it comes to customers’ consuming the café experience as a whole. As Interviewee 2 and 3 said in a group interview, foreign franchise cafés that entered Korea and did not catch the characteristics of typical Korean cafés “only introduced the take-out culture and eventually disappeared” (Interviewee 2).

The last characteristic of Korean cafés is that Koreans treat cafés as a “social place” (Interviewee 4). People go to cafés to interact with others. In the U.S., a lot of people visit cafés alone and tend to use laptops or mobile phones even when they are with someone. However, in Korea, it is a little strange to see people stay at a café alone. For example, whenever I went to Minto and Raintree alone for my fieldwork, the employees asked me if I was alone. Only after I said “Yes”, they led me to an empty seat with a surprised look on their faces. Likewise, most of the time, Koreans use cafés to socialize with their friends or do activities offered at cafés with the friends. Interestingly, this was why it was difficult for me to intervene in their activities and interview the customers for my fieldwork. A few people are alone only in franchise cafés and certain theme cafés, such as study cafés and comic book cafés, which offer activities that can be done alone.

When compared to the café cultures of other parts of the world, the characteristics of Korean café culture appear more prominent. Interviewee 9, who is a Japanese exchange student in Korea, claimed that Japanese people use McDonald’s or family restaurants like cafés. Because going to a café costs too much, Japanese customers stay at McDonald’s for a long time talking to friends or working on their homework. In Beijing, people also prefer restaurants to cafés. The romantic and comfortable atmosphere of McDonald’s and KFC, makes them the ideal places for dating for young couples and teenagers (Yan 2009, 91). The use of cafés in the U.S. is similar to that of cafés in Korea. Nonetheless, many people in American cafés work or read books alone. Compared to cafés in other countries, Korean cafés seem to have a greater variety of types and food. Also people seldom go to cafés alone. Overall, Korean cafés neither are the places to temporarily use to have food nor provide a periphery activity. By visiting cafés in the middle of a day with a clear purpose of what to enjoy, Koreans normally treat cafés as the main event of a day.

Factors contributing to diversity of café culture in Korea

As seen from above, niche marketing of Korean cafés keeps Koreans entertained and pleased. Since there are so many cafés in Korea already, it might be hard to jump into the market with a new café business now. On the other hand, the café market also seems limitless as long as the idea is a little different from those of the existing cafés. Although the history of Korean café culture began with the introduction of coffee into Korea and Koreans’ strong curiosity and love towards the foreign food, the diversity of current café culture possesses a number of cultural aspects as its reasons for development. A set of contributing factors includes speedy modernization, population density, sensitivity to trends, couple culture, emphasis on entertainment, and cultural notions – for example, collectivism and Confucianism. However, I will focus mainly on those that were

frequently mentioned by my interviewees: Korea's population density, its polychronic culture, and collectivistic character.

Population density

In my interviews, population density was the most frequently discussed factor that has a strong influence on the development of Korean café culture. Korea is 96,920 sq km (37,421 sq mi) big, and there are around 49 million people living on the peninsula. In other words, a population that is 7.5 times greater than that of Indiana is living on a piece of land that is a little larger than Indiana. According to 2011 World Bank's report, the population density in Korea was 504.28 people per sq km in 2010, the 13th highest in the world. Moreover, the population density of Seoul ranks the highest among OECD countries. When my interviewees talked about the population density, they were, in fact, implying three different aspects of population density: small land, lots of people in the limited area, and relatively small population compared to those of many other countries in the world.

First of all, Korea is a tiny country compared to nations, like Canada or the U.S. There is not much space for individuals to play sports or tour around. Therefore, using its available city space, Korea has created tourist destinations using cafés.

I often get to talk to Chinese exchange students on campus. As many of them ask me to take pictures for them, they tell me that there seems to be so many cafés in Korea. So I say "Yes". Geographically, I think Korea is not a big country, and there are not many tourism sites that come up in mind either. Because of that, Koreans seem to create entertaining places like that [cafés]. For example, Sinsadong... Sinsadong's Garosu Street.⁸ You know, there are a lot of cafés on Garosu Street. It was not a famous place in the past, but it became more and more famous because people tried to make creative cafés there. Later Garosu Street became a popular tourist site.

Interviewee 4

As Interviewee 4 said, there are several streets and towns in Korea – for instance, Sinsadong and Daehakro – that used to be unknown but eventually became famous tourist destinations because of the concentration of cute cafés in the areas.⁹

Secondly, the small nation with such a high population has a big burden to satisfy its citizens' desire to enjoy their lives. In a group interview, Interviewee 2 and 3 mentioned that most people in Korea live in tall apartments due to the high population density while many people in North America live in private houses. Because of this condition, in which individuals have to find leisure activities indoors and in crowded cities, there is a greater need to somehow come up with places for the leisure activities. As a result, theme cafés began to appear in Korea. Theme cafés not only provide extra entertainment to Koreans but also often provide solutions to the problems they face as

⁸ Insadong is one of neighborhoods in Gangnam-gu district of Seoul. Garosu Street is a famous tree-lined street that is crowded with art galleries, accessory shops, and cafés.

⁹ Daehakro is a street in Jongno-gu district of Seoul. There is Seoul National University, the best university in Korea, near this street. Because there are all kinds of performances held in this area, Daehakro is considered to be a street of culture.

they live in the highly populated country. For example, puppy lovers, who live in apartments, can satisfy their need at a puppy café because pets are not allowed in most apartments.

Even though Korea is an extremely populous nation, its total population size is smaller than those of many other countries. According to Interviewee 7, there are “only” 49 million people in Korea whereas the U.S. has over 300 million. Therefore, even if cafés in the U.S. do not try hard to give any special change, there must still be an enormous number of people who are happy with the current American café culture as long as they have drink coffee. In other words, Korean cafés are not in a position where they can sit back and relax without constantly coming up with new features.

Polychronic culture

According to cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall, polychronic cultures feel “comfortable with multi-tasking” (Hooker 2003, 131). Korean people’s tendency to enjoy several activities at the same time seems to have expedited the development of Korean café culture. This tendency is considered to originate from the combination of busy, competitive characteristics of Korean society and its strong pursuit of entertainment. In the highly competitive country, Koreans have lived the non-stop working lives regardless of their occupations. Nobody has enough time to be with anybody. Under-aged students do not have much time to see their own family because of after school academies. Even after they enter colleges, men struggle to think about how efficiently they will use their twenties keeping the two years of the mandatory army duty in their minds. At the same time, women in their twenties plan to take extra exams, like TOEIC or CPA, or study abroad in order to fill their resumes with valuable certificates and experiences. Once young adults are employed by a company, they still live a rushed life because of overtime work and a lack of holidays. However, as Professor Nando Kim states in *Trend Korea 2012*, individuals still want to invest some time in leisure activities. As a result of their agony of how to use time as efficiently as possible, Koreans seem to have developed the ability to multi-task. A café is a perfect place for this because people can work or meet friends while eating at the same time. Interviewee 6 also agrees that Korean people like trying several things at the same time.

I think our people [Koreans] like multi-tasking very much. Doing this and that... Killing two birds with one stone? People prefer not only drinking something at a café but also engaging in various activities at the same time. As this kind of demand goes up, that side of culture [café culture] seems to develop more and more. As you know, a typical image of Koreans is “quickly, quickly”. Compared to others, Korean people like experiencing dynamic things.

Interviewee 6

To Koreans, cafés might be the right place to keep up with their daily activities as they enjoy their leisure time at the same time. Different kinds of cafés present a wide range of luxury options to Koreans so that they can pick an appropriate one depending on what they wish to do as they have a sip of blueberry yogurt smoothie. Ironically, while individual tastes are highly respected in Korean café culture, collectivism is another factor that has made café culture flourish.

Collectivism

Like China and Japan, Korea is a strongly relationship-based, collectivist nation. Individuals like doing activities with others. A café is “one of a few places where several people can go together” casually (Interviewee 4). For example, when a group of people go to libraries with friends, they want to chat with them time to time as they study because they are with their friends, However, they need to stay quiet in the library. So a study café becomes a perfect alternative to the library. Also “Koreans like to gather together and tend to say ‘Do you want to have a cup tea or coffee?’ when they want to have a talk with somebody” (Interviewee 8). So whenever they meet their friends or colleagues, they usually do so at cafés.

Multiculturalism among individuals is also triggered by Korean collectivism. In ethnically homogenous Korea, being modest and not standing out have long been a respected virtue. However, once people tasted the fun of going to distinctive cafés, they began to enjoy a sense of individualism.

Wherever you go in Korea, everything looks similar. Honestly, standing out in Korea is... For example in Hongdae, there is Hongdae culture.¹⁰ The reason why Hongdae culture was born is because sticking out or being different from others has not been a good thing in Korea. [...] In Hongdae, the peculiar Hongdae culture is settled down, so no matter how much you stand out in a crowd, there is a notion that it is acceptable. And that’s why there are more cool, special cafés in Hongdae than anywhere else.

Interviewee 3

Consequently, the lack of ethnic multiculturalism and the long history of collectivism in Korea have made individuals want to express their preferences and try to look for individual multiculturalism within the homogenous population by going to cafés of their style. As a result, more unique types of cafés appear in the café market enlarging the pool of choices available to the Korean.

What do Korean cafés mean to Koreans?

Functions of cafés

In order to understand the meanings of cafés to Koreans, first, we need to understand how they use cafés. To Koreans, a café is a collection of four different places, which share similarities with but also are different from cafés. Firstly, a café is a shelter. Even though the food offered at cafés are much more luxurious than what ordinary shelters offer, cafés function like a shelter since many people enter random cafés as they wait for their companions to arrive. Cafés “do not kick people out” no matter how long people stay because customers’ payment includes not only food but also space and time in cafés. This shelter-like characteristic is difficult to find in places like restaurants, where the owners want customers to leave as soon as the customers are done with their food so that the restaurants can accept new customers.

¹⁰ Hongdae Area is located in Mapo-gu district of Seoul. It is known for clubs, bars, and cafés. Hongdae also has Hongik University, which is well known for its Fine Art and Design program.

Cafés can sometimes be restaurants because there are numerous kinds of beverages and desserts. Some cafés, like Minto, actually provide full lunch and dinner menu. However, the main difference between restaurants and cafés in Korea is that different types of restaurants – whether it is a formal restaurant or a fast food chain, for example – often indicate social class or the quality of an occasion while everybody can enjoy cafés without worrying about social indicators.

As mentioned earlier, cafés and coffee shops can be used interchangeably due to the availability of coffee, some desserts, and space for individuals in both places. If ever differentiated from coffee shops, however, Korean cafés are able to not only provide a greater variety of food but also guarantee a wider range of satisfaction – gustatory, auditory, olfactory, visual, and even tactile all at the same time.

Lastly, in a sense, cafés and places of leisure activities overlap. Today, theme cafés can offer services that used to be exclusive to karaoke, tourist attractions, arcades, and recreation centers. Yet Korean cafés provide additional features, such as convenience and spare time, besides fun leisure activities. Consequently, Korean cafés are highly multi-functional.

The reason why cafés in Korea contain several functions is not because Korea lacks shelters or restaurants. It is because Korean cafés exist as “space” that is “socially produced and consumed” based on the cultural characteristics and needs of Koreans (Hubbard 1997, 41).

Meanings that Korean cafés hold

Cafés, first of all, mean comfort to Koreans. Six out of nine interviewees answered that they go to cafés to pursue comfort. Despite the decorative characteristic of Korean cafés, romance was not the first word that came up in their mind. Tired from the endless cycle of work and duties, Korean people seek rest whenever they can. To them, café is the best choice because the quiet and casual atmosphere relaxes the exhausted souls. Stylish Jazz background music consoles their heart. Most of all, the place itself invites the individuals to a small, pretty world separate from the crowded streets and desks packed with paper. Cafés sit customers down in comfortable chairs and offer tasty beverages so that the people can recharge themselves before they go back out to the daily life by enjoying the few minutes of luxury during their stay there. For instance, Interviewee 7, who is a coffee mania, claimed to visit cafés regularly to organize his thoughts.

I go to cafés to meet people too, but I usually go there to organize my thoughts. Originally, I really like playing basketball, but I eventually hurt myself from playing it. I used to play it when I had a lot of thoughts in winter or something, but I could not play basketball anymore. So the alternative to basketball became to be a café. Whenever I want to make an important decision, I have this “rewinding time” to think if I made any silly choice because of my emotion as I have a cup of coffee.

Interviewee 7

In a way, cafés are like a place for self-meditation. They are a mind-calming place. Likewise, a lot of people seek comfort by going to cafés, whether alone or with others, and taking some time to not worry about anything for a moment.

Secondly, a café is freedom to Koreans. When thinking about comfort, another source of comfort one can think of is probably home. Although both café and home might provide a cozy, welcoming environment, café can give people privacy that even home cannot provide. One day when I was conducting my fieldwork at Minto, I happened to overhear a lady behind me because she was speaking a little loudly in a strong dialect. After listening to her for a few seconds, I noticed that she was fiercely objecting to the marriage between her stepdaughter and a man who had been divorced and had a child. She chose a café, instead of her house, so that her husband could not notice the situation. Since matters, like divorce, are still treated like a taboo in Korea, I was surprised to hear such a private story in public. Nevertheless, the assumption that others must be indifferent about what she was saying made her feel secure and comfortable to discuss about that topic at Minto. In other words, although people sometimes need to be careful about their behaviors and words even at home because of other family members, the guaranteed privacy in a public place called café seems to offer an exit even from one's home. By going to cafés, Koreans feel free also from their stained daily life. For example, talking away about any recent happening or complaining about one's boss to her close friends at a café functions as a daily or weekly ritual of cleansing oneself spiritually. This may free the person from possible psychological burdens or unpleasant feelings she might have carried around the whole day.

Most importantly, café is where Korean people refill their happiness. "Refreshing one's feeling" is a phrase frequently used by Koreans when they hope to totally change mood by, for example, going shopping or changing hairstyles. Tasting delicious desserts and looking through menu at a nice café amuse Koreans. Cute decorations refresh their eyes, and calm music refreshes their ears. Depending on what type of café to choose, they can have a virtual trip to Europe or to Hello Kitty world. Besides refreshing feelings, to the individuals living in the busy world where most communications are done over mobile phones, sitting down with their friends and colleagues to talk face-to-face is also a precious opportunity. According to my experience and interview result, people talk mostly about recent events in their lives, love, school, or work. Knowing that they pay for desserts and beverages to discuss about the trivial matters, Koreans still enjoy the overall activity of chatting with their acquaintances because there is nothing more important than keeping bonds with others strong in this relationship-based society.

Conclusion

"I have no idea what we did where when there weren't this many cafés in Korea," said Interviewee 8. Now Koreans go to cafés so habitually that they cannot imagine Korea without cafés. When they need a cup of coffee, private time, or a conversation with friends, many small parts of their city are open for them to escape from their competitive world in search of comfort, freedom, and happiness.

Korean café culture is a product of cultural hybridization. To certain extent, it is a result of globalization because café culture came from outside of Korea. Nevertheless, Korean café culture does not show globalization as homogenization. In other words, although Korea adopted the Western café culture, Korean people did not consume café culture as it was but changed the café culture into a different form based on the Koreans' taste. Consequently, Korean cafés are an example of cultural hybridization, which even

goes beyond glocalization.¹¹ According to George Ritzer, distinctive hybrid cultures are “not reducible to either local or global culture[s]” (Ritzer 2011, 159). Considering that glocalization is a combination of global and local cultures, I conclude that Korean café culture is cultural hybridization rather than glocalization since Korea did not use Western cafés to alter them a little bit but has actually invented a whole new culture only with the concept called café.

Future of Korean cafés

Even though Koreans usually get positive experiences from cafés, some are also worried about several aspects of cafés. For instance, although they are glad to have a lot of activity options available at various cafés, they are worried that the range of general leisure activities might become limited to going to cafés. In other words, because Koreans can enjoy enough entertainment at cafés, other types of leisure activities – hiking or drawing, for example – might fade away from people’s lives. Also a few of my interviewees criticized that the multi-functional aspect of Korean café culture might cause an extinction of several places for entertainment. However, some expressed their hope in potential growth of Korean cafés in the world’s café market. Interviewee 8 thinks that because currently “Koreans have this urge to have a cup of coffee even if they do not get to have a bowl of rice”, Korean café culture is expected to keep developing. Interviewee 7, too, mentioned that Korean cafés have a potential to succeed in world market using its unique characteristics. As many hope, Korean cafés are starting to reach out to different parts of the world already. According to Interviewee 9 who lives in Japan, Korean towns in Japan have Korean type of cafés, and those areas are so popular among the Japanese that the towns are more crowded than Japan’s major cities, like Shibuya and Harajyuku. Furthermore, Caffebene opened its first chain in a foreign country in New York in 2011. Currently, it is in the process of opening more of its chains in Los Angeles, Beijing, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. Korea received café culture from a foreign culture a century ago and had its first *dabang* opened in 1902. Although people at that time consumed the foreign culture admiring the taste of modernity, today Korea is attracting not only Koreans but also the ones who inspired them 110 years ago with its own unique café culture. Now the question is whether they are ready to accept the Korean version.

¹¹ Ritzer states that glocalization is “Interpenetration of the global and the local resulting in unique outcomes in different geographic areas” (Ritzer 2011, 159).

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Appendix

Information about the interviewees

	Gender	Age	Occupation	Location of interview
Interviewee 1	Male	23	College student	Raintree
Interviewee 2	Male	23	College student	Elpis
Interviewee 3	Female	23	College student	Elpis
Interviewee 4	Female	22	College student	Elpis, Raintree
Interviewee 5	Female	49	Housewife	-
Interviewee 6	Female	22	College student	Raintree
Interviewee 7	Male	23	College student	Minto
Interviewee 8	Female	26	Company worker	Raintree
Interviewee 9	Female	23	College student /	(Video-chat interview)

			Japanese	
Interviewee 10	Male	24	College student	-
Interviewee 11	Male	30s(?)	Raintree owner	Raintree