

## 김치와 김치의間

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A labyrinthine series of tunnels twists around Tsuruhashi station in Osaka — steel caves of commercial activity, dimly illuminated by fluorescent light. Commuter trains rattle across a raised platform overhead as shoppers and vendors go about their business unfazed.

Signs hang above each entrance to the covered market known as the Tsuruhashi Shoutengai, but each opening is dark and inconspicuous, wedged between flashier storefronts that line the main road branching out from the mouth of the station. Shoutengai (商店街), or shopping arcades, can be found at every stop along an urban train route. Most shoutengai make every effort to stand out, to flaunt and appeal. Yet this one seems to be in hiding. Those who come seeking Tsuruhashi's know what to find beyond, but less informed visitors will find their noses pick up what their eyes have missed: Plumes of smoke, heavy with the smell of grilled meat and garlic, betray the entrance to Japan's largest Koreatown.



Red is the first graphic cue, the first sign of something visibly foreign in Tsuruhashi. The market's offerings are saturated with it. Open display cases are packed with every type of vegetable, each of which has been pickled, fermented and soaked in red. Red is the color of kimchi, of the chili paste gochujang, of what the world has come to associate with Korean food as a whole. Once a relatively rare color in traditional Japanese food, it has seeped into a number of Japanese staples today, largely thanks to outside influence. It's in karashi mentaiko (辛子明太子), spicy pollock roe — a side dish and condiment so ubiquitous across the Japanese archipelago that many are unaware of its ties to the Korean peninsula. It's in rayu (ラー油), a Chinese chili oil that adds extra heat to steaming bowls of rice, is dropped into ramen and smothered over gyoza potstickers (two additional Chinese imports). It's also the color of "kimuchi."

Japan is the top buyer of Korean kimchi, and domestic demand paved the way for a manufacturing industry of its own. Japanese kimchi, (キムチ) pronounced "kimuchi," is often sweeter and milder than the Korean variety, to satisfy local tastes. Japanese manufacturers have also sought workarounds to the time- and labor-intensive production process, and the resulting kimuchi is less pungent and often unfermented. Some may see these alterations as inauthentic and subtly loaded with disparagement: an aside about the stink of traditional kimchi and the Koreans who eat it.

Kimchi has indisputable symbolic significance to Koreans, and three and a half decades of colonial rule by Japan can never be erased. Perceived attempts to dissociate the national dish from its motherland have therefore been cause for outrage. Korea's claim to ownership and Japan's pride in its adaptation resulted in a kimchi nationalism-fueled dispute in the mid-1990s, when both countries sought recognition for their versions as an "official food" of the Atlanta Olympics.

And yet, the fact that any version of the dish, kimchi or kimuchi, has found a mainstream audience in Japan is proof that times have changed. These days it is served as a side to grilled meat at popular yakiniku barbecue restaurants across the country. It shows up in trendy recipe books and websites for health-conscious dieters, as well as on chain fast-food restaurant menus: in burgers, stir-fries and soups. Japanese people have increasingly adopted the dish as their own.

In this age of mass kimuchi consumption, the media churn out reports pointing to the revitalization of Japan's Koreatowns as evidence of a new era. It's an era in which young people's open wallets and open minds have the power to bring the two countries together. And there is some proof of this phenomenon to be found. Another market exists in Tsuruhashi near the old one. This street market is more spacious and open to the air, with a large gate at its entrance unabashedly announcing visitors' arrival to "Korea Town." The back-alley feel is not as pronounced here, and in fact, both this market and the old Shoutengai receive a healthy flow of foot traffic. The Korean Wave has hit Tokyo even harder. The shops of Shin-Okubo, a Koreatown three hours from Tsuruhashi by bullet train, are regularly flooded with teens sampling imports of Seoul's trendiest street foods. K-pop idols' faces smile down from ads plastered across every storefront, and snail slime skin products line the shelves inside.

But the legacy of the complex relationship between Korea and Japan can be observed in Tsuruhashi's old market. The story of a Korean diaspora fighting for its identity is preserved in the dingy, claustrophobic kimchi shops of the Shoutengai. (Who could have foreseen such high demand for these pickles from the very people who mocked them?) It's written in the fine print of the signs in the shops of the market: in the Hangul characters that only occasionally appear alongside Japanese — tiny and secondary in importance — a reminder of the attempted erasure of the Korean language that forced Korean subjects under imperial rule to speak only in Japanese and adopt new names. As much newfound attention this Koreatown has received in recent years, there's no hiding the past attempt to cover it up. For better or for worse, a culture buried partially under the earth for decades will be changed by the elements around it. And Tsuruhashi, this Korean-Japanese hybrid, formed and stowed away in the dark for many years to ferment, has developed a unique flavor of its own.