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## Sensory Connections Between Food and Femininity in Yim Soon-rye's *Little Forest* and Lee Seo-gun's *The Recipe*

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*Bonnie Tilland*

In Yim Soon-rye's 2018 film *Little Forest*, viewers witness young protagonist Hye-won spend four seasons in the countryside home she grew up in, living in rhythm with the planting and the harvest, and preparing and eating foods in accordance with their proper seasons.<sup>1</sup> As winter deepens, she hangs persimmons on the eaves of the house to dry, something she had watched her mother do. The scene resonates with a scene from an earlier film, *The Recipe* (2010), in which young protagonist Hye-jin hangs *meju* (fermented soybean cakes) to dry on the rafters of her house.

In terms of genre, pacing, and plot the two films could hardly be more disparate, and the fact that both were directed by female filmmakers should not on its own justify a comparison (after all, male filmmakers are not compared solely based on their gender). However, both films share a sensory focus on food and its connection to female identity, which is further complexified by the gender identity of the respective filmmakers. This chapter begins with a discussion of the thematic foci of female filmmakers in South Korea, and how the expectations placed on them have shaped their career trajectories. The sensory focus of Yim's *Little Forest* is also compared with other films in her oeuvre, followed by an analysis of food and femininity in the greater South Korean media landscape, including in Lee Seo-gun's *The Recipe*. While *Little Forest* is a rich film through which to explore multiple aspects of South Korea, including the urban–rural divide and the intense neoliberal pressures upon South Korean youth—as well as Yim's own activism around these issues—the primary focus of the chapter is the relationship between the sensory experiences of preparing and eating food and women's identity in the film. Yim explores the sensory and affective connections between feeding oneself, feeding others, and feeding the community. Female relationships—mother and daughter,



Figure 6.1 Haewon hangs persimmons outside her countryside home to dry (*Little Forest*, Yim Soon-rye, 2018)



Figure 6.2 Hye-jin hangs meju (fermented soybean cakes) on the rafters of her countryside house to dry (*The Recipe*, Lee Seo-gun, 2010)

and female friends—are privileged, with an understated romance with a male friend fitting in with the female relationships, rather than disrupting them. *Little Forest* has quite a different focus on women, the senses, and food to Lee's *The Recipe*, in which food is transformed into magic through romantic love.

The novelty of Yim's layered sensory approach to food and feminine identity in *Little Forest* is brought into relief when one compares it with other food representations in recent films, from the fried chicken in *Extreme Job* to the “jjapaguri” of *Parasite*. Whereas Yim has slowly built her sensory world over decades, Lee popped up with the uncategorizable *Rub Love* in 1998, only to disappear and resurface again for 2010's *The Recipe*. The genre-defying *The Recipe* features bean paste stew as the center of a mystery, endowing women's food preparation with magic. In contrast to Yim's sensory smorgasbord, the star dish of Lee's (much less popular) earlier film appears and disappears, rather like the director herself. Lee's interest in food and relationships is also present in Park Chul-soo's *301, 302* (1995), on which she was the writer. In that film, neighbors in an apartment complex enter into a dysfunctional friendship

that revolves around food, with the woman in number 301 cooking obsessively and binge-eating and the woman in 302 suffering from anorexia. Baron analyzed the horror created by excessive and repulsive food scenes in which food connects to sexual trauma and alienation, noting that “whereas utopian films use meals to illustrate the building of community, this dystopian film will probe neuroses and show that the inability to accept food and the drive to force others to eat are signs of severe dysfunction.”<sup>2</sup> While it is difficult to separate writer Lee’s influences from director Park Chul-soo’s for 301, 302, food is again a preoccupation in *The Recipe*, though this time it is intensely utopian. Filmic connections between women and food on the one hand, and dichotomies between on-screen instant/convenience food and traditional/local food on the other, illustrate a sensory approach to cinema that articulates the experiences and focal points of South Korean female filmmakers.

As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, Yim Soo-rye has earned her title of “South Korea’s best-known female filmmaker” through her nearly three decades of filmmaking. Her focus on slice-of-life stories has stayed consistent throughout her career, and despite relatively low budgets, many of her films have achieved mainstream success and loyal followings (particularly 2008’s sports film *Forever the Moment* and 2018’s *Little Forest*). She is the only female auteur consistently associated with the Korean New Wave in film of the late 1990s through mid-2000s. Previous analyses of Yim’s work have focused on time and space in her films,<sup>3</sup> her strong stance on animal rights and anti-discrimination activism,<sup>4</sup> and youth psychology.<sup>5</sup> While all of these are ripe for analysis, it is her sensory focus in her films that sets her apart from other filmmakers working in South Korea today. Yim’s most recent film, *Little Forest*, is based on the earlier Japanese manga and subsequent Japanese feature film,<sup>6</sup> but she brings particular South Korean sensory conceptions and food knowledge to her version. Mori’s adaptation sprawls over two parts (spring/summer and fall/winter), with less dialogue and more narration, and the natural landscape taking on an even greater role.<sup>7</sup> In Yim’s more abbreviated adaptation, female bonding takes center stage, and while viewers do not know for sure whether Hye-won’s mother returns at the end of the film, there is more of a sense of psychological closure in Yim’s film. Yim’s directorial choices cannot be reduced to her gender, but there is a notable lack of a male gaze sexualizing Hye-won and other female characters, or reducing them to tropes.

If Yim Soon-rye’s decades of filmmaking resulted in success and recognition—even as she continues a humble life outside of Seoul in the mountainous area of Yangpyeong—the director of 2010’s *The Recipe*, Lee Seo-gun, followed a more familiar path for female filmmakers in South Korea: accolades, and then obscurity. Lee is fourteen years Yim’s junior but they started their engagement with South Korean film worlds around the same time. After returning from film school in Paris, Yim was one of the producers on Yeo

Kyun-dong's crime comedy *Out to the World* (1994), before directing her own first feature-length film (*Three Friends*, 1996). Lee was the screenwriter for Park Chul-soo's shocking food-centric thriller *301, 302* (1995) at the tender age of twenty, returning to Korea after studying film in New York. A newspaper article of the time described Lee as one of the *yuhakpa* (study abroad faction), as opposed to those who came up through the domestic Chungmuro studio system.<sup>8</sup> Like Yim, Lee received awards for a short film (*Suicide Party*, in 1996; for Yim it was *Promenade in the Rain* in 1994) before directing her first feature film. Lee's first feature film, *Rub Love* (1998), confused audiences and failed at the box office. Lee emerged again in 2010 with *The Recipe*, which was produced by veteran director Jang Jin (*Guns and Talks; Welcome to Dongmakgol*),<sup>9</sup> by which time Yim had made three more feature films (*Waikiki Brothers; Forever the Moment; and Rolling Home with a Bull*) and two shorts. *The Recipe* screened at several domestic film festivals and was highly anticipated in part due to its star-studded cast: actor Ryu Seung-ryong played the TV news program journalist tasked with figuring out a mystery, and actress Lee Yowon was the mysterious female lead, Hye-jin. Lee Dong-wook played Lee Yowon's love interest. While he would become one of South Korea's most in-demand actors, in 2010 he was a relative unknown. Jang Jin's role as producer was played up, to the extent that some media outlets mistakenly referred to him as the film's director. The film's star power and producer could not save the film from overall poor reviews and disappointing box-office sales. Film critic Djuna, in their review of the film, wrote that the mystery's momentum was frequently interrupted by an ultimately boring love story<sup>10</sup>—a view seemingly shared by many, despite substantial commentary on the film's lush food imagery.

While Yim's *Little Forest* allows food and sensory engagement with it to lead, Lee's *The Recipe* subsumes sensory experience to tragic romantic love. And yet, despite this generic conventionality, feminist readings are possible, with many small touches that suggest a female filmmaker behind the scenes. Although one review complained that the brilliant Lee Yowon only appeared on screen for about a quarter of the film—despite promotional posters exclusively showing her face<sup>11</sup>—her tragic story becomes all-consuming, with the male journalist becoming obsessed with solving the mystery. In documentary-like footage in the first part of the film, various men appear on screen and say boorish things about the mysterious and beautiful young woman who passed away with a clay pot of *doenjang* (fermented bean paste) in her hands, but in the end the journalist is pursuing the mystery not out of a romantic or sexual obsession with the young woman, but due to the mysterious pull of the perfect *doenjang jjigae* itself. The young woman, Hye-jin, spends the film in a state of deep grief—happy only in flashbacks, as viewers know the love story is doomed from the start—but her grief still cannot sully the nurturing power of her *doenjang*. When the CEO happens upon the restaurant where Hye-jin

is temporarily working and has his senses of taste and smell restored by her cooking, he quickly falls in love with her. Yet unlike fairytales or plenty of other cinematic examples, the rich man does not attempt to possess her, but instead respectfully honors her request to drive her to the village where she and her lover met, though she knows that he has perished at sea. The final moments between the smitten CEO and the grieving Hye-jin before the car plunges over a ravine are spent in the company of thousands of butterflies attracted by the magical *doenjang*, a profoundly sensual and sensory experience.

#### YIM SOON-RYE, LEE SEO-GUN, AND SOUTH KOREAN FEMALE FILMMAKERS

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The consideration of food, the senses, and femininity in these films by Yim and Lee inspires curiosity over the conditions the filmmakers have worked under, and how this contributes to their themes and trajectories. Until the mid-1990s, the South Korean film production system demanded that aspiring filmmakers first serve as an apprentice to an established (male) film director.<sup>12</sup> Yim and Lee both debuted with their feature films in the late 1990s, and while they served as producer and screenwriter on the films of established male directors—both more common roles for women in film than directing—they established their reputations through winning prizes for short films first. Notably, both also studied film abroad before returning to South Korea, as making one's way through the Chungmuro studio system was a difficult prospect for any new filmmaker at the time, let alone a female filmmaker. In Yim's case, as she moved beyond her debut feature and began to establish herself, she received some criticism for not focusing on "women's issues."<sup>13</sup> After her first feature film *Three Friends* focused on male high-school students, some criticized her continued focus on men in the next film, *Waikiki Brothers*. In fact, more of Yim's films feature men in leading roles than women, with *Little Forest* and *Forever the Moment* as notable exceptions, and male-female balance in the reunited couple in *Rolling Home with a Bull*. Rather than interpreting this as a lack of interest in feminist issues, the themes Yim tackles include militarism, economic inequality, body image and lookism, social marginalization and corruption—revealing her consistent concern over gender equality and social equality more broadly defined. After decades, Yim Soon-rye is increasingly anticipated at domestic and international film festivals alike, but as she persistently pursues projects that first and foremost interest her rather than overly concerning herself with the film-going public, many of her films stay under the radar. While *Forever the Moment* was an unexpected hit in 2008, *Rolling Home with a Bull* in 2010 had little impact. Yim's directorial voice is established, and no one would expect populist melodrama in her works, but other female directors who have begun

careers more recently still tell stories of being instructed by production companies to direct melodramas focusing on “women’s identity” first, before being allowed to direct films in their desired genre.<sup>14</sup> A related problem that Paquet identifies since the late 2000s “has been the increased concentration of films made within the umbrella of major local studios such as CJ and Lotte, and the subsequent loss of power of individual producers.” South Korean female filmmakers have also been relatively neglected on the international film festival circuit, even as they have had success at domestic Korean film festivals.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Lee Seo-gun, the trajectory is that of a screenwriting prodigy failing to make a significant impact with first feature film *Rub Love*, and then failing to make a mark a second time more than a decade later, despite the backing of established filmmaker Jang Jin as producer. One review from 2010 praises the pureness of *The Recipe*, and its creative transformation of a “hickish” (*chonseureupda*) ingredient like *doenjang* to a magical potion, but ultimately cautions viewers that “you shouldn’t expect novel ideas, a smooth plot, or characters that make an impression.”<sup>16</sup> A review from 2019 praises the film in retrospect for awakening the senses through *doenjang*—suggesting that viewers were just not ready for a film in which bean paste is removed from Korean tradition and made youthfully sensual—and compares it with another “food film” (the Japanese *Kamome Diner*) and also with the importance of the sense of smell in *Parasite*.<sup>17</sup> A very short review from 2019, reintroducing *The Recipe* to coincide with its screening on the CGV cable channel, mentions Lee Seo-gun once, but mainly laments the film’s failure at the box office in 2010 despite “director Jang Jin’s time and effort.”<sup>18</sup> Many of Jang Jin’s signature elements are indeed present in the film, including witty banter and magical realist elements—such as the lighting in the scene in which the wanted criminal eats the *doenjang jjigae*, and the snow that falls in slow motion—but the pacing, plot, and genre shifts are Lee’s. If the film-going public was not ready for Lee’s re-interpretation of *doenjang*, as the one reviewer surmised, it is telling that another 2019 review of Lee’s previous work, *Rub Love*, drew similar conclusions about Lee’s timing in 1998.<sup>19</sup> The story of a bleak Seoul in the year 2028, and the “erased memories of the killer Nana and the comic artist Cho Han” (to quote the film promo posters), could not console a viewing public suffering from the social turmoil caused by the IMF crisis. The review also referred to a critic at the time calling *Rub Love* a “postmodern puzzle made up of unfamiliar images outside of the soil [*toyang*] of Korean cinema.” One of the few extant (though very brief) English-language reviews of Lee’s first film calls it “a genuine original,” and predicts that “Lee, who wrote the script for 301, 302, clearly has great things in prospect.”<sup>20</sup> Given the reviews and reflections on Lee’s films in 2019, perhaps it is now time for her to make a reappearance for a third feature film. As a South Korean female filmmaker, Lee subverted the expectation to make melodramas and films on “women’s issues” first and

genre film later, starting with the decidedly unusual *Rub Love*. Once that film was evaluated as too “out there,” she attempted a melodrama with a gustatory twist with *The Recipe*, but that too failed to meet expectations. While Yim has steadily made slice-of-life films even with the expectations of the South Korean film world and viewing public pushing against her, Lee Seo-gun represents another more discouraging outcome for South Korean female filmmakers. She emerged, then re-emerged, and now generally cannot be found among lists of South Korean female filmmakers. To be sure, male filmmakers have also failed, and failed spectacularly, but it is hard not to conclude that such unique films may have propelled a male filmmaker further, despite their undeniable flaws.

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#### SENSORY TEACHINGS IN YIM SOON-RYE’S FILMS

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Yim Soon-rye’s films largely deal with those who have “failed” in their lives in one way or another, from the three socio-economically disadvantaged youth in her first feature film *Three Friends*, to a washed-up band in *Waikiki Brothers*, to former handball champions in *Forever the Moment*, to a couple who failed in their relationship in *Rolling Home with a Bull*, among others. *Waikiki Brothers*, *Forever the Moment*, and most recently *Little Forest* are also notable for their particular sensory focus. *Waikiki Brothers* does not focus on music particularly intensively, but rather the relationship between the band members; nonetheless, the auditory element is significant. *Forever the Moment* is a sports film and features the tactile physicality of the relatively obscure sport of handball. *Little Forest* delights in the gustatory pleasures of preparing and eating fresh food. Yim is engaged with the senses, but not in a coldly aesthetic way nor in a wholly emotionally invested way. In interviews, Yim has spoken about her films as practicing empathy rather than too-close sympathy with characters, as well as intending for her films to “open up the possibilities of a discourse between the film and the viewer.”<sup>21</sup> She is also interested in the relationship of the individual to their social world—and notably in *Little Forest* and *Rolling Home with a Bull*, the natural world as well—and thus does not focus on traditional character development or character sketches. Yim’s films tend toward reconciliation between characters or a broader tolerance acquired by the end of the film, and the sensory experiences of characters through their surroundings and interpersonal relationships serve as teachings. In *Rolling Home with a Bull*, these teachings are explicitly connected to a Buddhist worldview. In *Little Forest*, Hye-won observes the changing of the seasons and the growing of plants after being disconnected from these during her years in the city, and is healed enough by the scenery and fresh food to begin to understand her mother’s actions. Her understanding of her mother’s actions does not arrive in any sudden revelatory moments, but rather through

Hye-won's shifting perspective made possible through her changed relationship with the natural world and experience of the seasons.

As a widely acclaimed "food film," *Little Forest* engages with "the sensory" more tangibly than any of Yim's other films, though *Rolling Home with a Bull* has parallels. As with other food-centric films, it plays with synesthesia, "the way that different senses elaborate on each other, rather than being considered separate domains of experience."<sup>22</sup> Sutton, an anthropologist of food, instructs us to try to recall a smell or a taste on its own without a connected visual image, claiming that these senses are most often connected to memories of a place or an interaction. Throughout *Little Forest* viewers witness Hye-won recall interactions with her mother from earlier in her life, and even when she does not want the bittersweetness of these memories, the tastes and smells keep bringing them up unbidden. Moreover, the close-up shots of bubbling stews on a cold day, cold noodles with chunks of ice and cucumbers on a hot day, and dancing bonito flakes on *okonomiyaki* bring up separate sets of memories and taste/smell associations for individual viewers. In addition to the links between the gustatory, olfactory, auditory, haptic, and memory through the visual medium of film, Hye-won's verbal descriptions of tastes and elaborations of recipes also add a textual element; this resonates with tea practitioner/scholar Zhang's discussion of how she lost track of the taste of tea while trying to make a documentary about it, but recalled the tastes when writing down notes in text about her tasting experience.<sup>23</sup> This attention to synesthesia also helps explain the film's success across demographic categories: while it is first and foremost a slow and carefully crafted film with similarities to other Yim Soon-rye films, *Little Forest* also satisfies "food porn" impulses in an age of social media, and methodical yet hypnotic scenes of Hye-won preparing dishes while narrating the steps she takes bring to mind video blogging of recipes—albeit with much more skilled and lush cinematography than such videos usually involve. Notwithstanding certain similarities, *Little Forest* is an antidote to the quickly produced, often interchangeable content of video blogs, aiming to convey a message about slowing down and engaging in the natural world and in meaningful connections with friends. A strong contrast is drawn between Hye-won living in Seoul in flashbacks and Hye-won in her natural habitat in her countryside town: in Seoul she appears run down, making instant food such as packaged ramen noodles only to fill her up while studying, whereas in the countryside she recreates her mother's recipes and experiments with her own creations without concern over time limits and schedules.

At the beginning of *Little Forest*, Hye-won returns, in winter, to the house in which she grew up. After lighting a fire in the wood stove, the first thing she does is cook herself a meal, a simple soup made with napa cabbage and green onions she digs out from under the snow in the yard. In a flashback viewers see Hye-won in work uniform in a convenience store, grabbing a mouthful of food

from the inventory here and there when she has a spare moment. At the end of her shift she sits with a pre-packaged boxed lunch and digs in to the rice, only to spit it out a moment later, repulsed by its chemical taste. Back in her small apartment, she receives a voice message from her boyfriend letting her know that he has passed the grueling teachers' exam, while she has failed yet again. Opening her small fridge for bottled water to wash the unpleasant taste of the rice down, she eyes the sad contents—a lone apple and old packaged food. Back in her hometown, she tells a childhood friend that she came back “because she was hungry.” A few days after her return, she ravenously eats her paternal aunt's cooking despite their strained relationship, but going forward seems to absorb the culinary creative energy of the house her absent mother has left behind. Anything she wants to eat she makes from scratch—when she wants a drink she makes the rice liquor, *makkeoli*, herself—and as winter turns to spring she begins to plant as well. Occasional letters without a return address arrive from her mother, but they are only recipes, not explanations for why she left. Hye-won only gradually gains the recognition that the recipes are intended to welcome her back to her childhood home and bring her into her rightful power and ease with herself.

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*LITTLE FOREST VS. THE RECIPE: FOOD AND GENDER  
IN THE SOUTH KOREAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE*

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In contrast with Yim's *Little Forest*, food in *The Recipe* is linked with women's magic but does not explicitly play a role in connecting generations. Instead, it highlights women's sensuality. To be sure, *Little Forest* also does not focus on traditional recipes passed across generations, but only the psychic culinary connection between Hye-won and her mother, which then is naturally transformed into expressions of care from Hye-won to her friends. The connection is not about traditional Korean food, but rather all the food that can be made through living in close collaboration with the land and out of love for family and friends. After a flashback in which Hye-won's mother makes her *crème brûlée*—the camera focusing on Hye-won's mother's hands crushing the nuts at the bottom, pouring in the custard, and torching the top—Hye-won makes the same *crème brûlée* for her friend as an apology after an argument. In *The Recipe*, in contrast, the story insistently returns to the bean paste stew (*doenjang jjigae*), attempting to break down its parts (the salt, the water used in cooking, the fermented beans, and any errant plants or insects that may have become involved in the fermenting process) to determine what makes Hye-jin's stew so magical. In a review of *The Recipe*, Djuna observes that while the mystery—unfolding across creative mockumentary-style footage and even surprising interludes of animated sequences—seems that it may connect back

to Hye-jin's childhood or end as a tale of an enchanted restaurant, in the end it is a simple romance.

Hye-jin is young, and the man she is connected to romantically is also young. The two are geniuses who have learned [the culinary craft] on their own, without connection to the past or the older generation. It seems that Lee Seo-gun wanted to depart from the familiar image and fixed concept of *doenjang* and make a younger and more contemporary story.<sup>24</sup>

In trying to solve the mystery, the TV producer experiences traditional foodways and culinary magic in the course of his research, attending traditional fermented food workshops, tasting mountain stream water, and visiting a blind potter who made the pot in which Hye-jin stores her extraordinary *doenjang*. But while it is revealed over the course of the film that Hye-jin has grown up in a village known for its *meju* (bean cakes for making *doenjang*), her magic comes purely from her love for a young man in town known as “the goblin,” who is himself an expert in making *makkeoli*. The magic this strong love produces also helps others, even as Hye-jin grieves when her beloved does not return after going back to Japan for his grandfather's funeral. A CEO who has lost his sense of smell due to childhood trauma visits the restaurant where Hye-jin makes *doenjang jjigae*, and magically his sense of smell is restored. Unlike *Little Forest*, the senses in *The Recipe* are not focused on teaching and transmitting knowledge, but rather on healing, against a magical realist backdrop of love and fermentation. While *Little Forest* also deals with healing, it focuses on the transmission of care and sensory knowledge in the countryside space, whereas *The Recipe* focuses on the healing powers of romantic love.

Although *Little Forest* and *The Recipe* are profoundly different from one another in most respects, they are united by two common elements: a strong dichotomy between instant/convenience foods and traditional/local foods; and themes of connection between the feminine and the sensory. Between *The Recipe*'s release in 2010 and *Little Forest*'s in 2018, the culinary landscape in South Korea underwent a great deal of transformation, with ever-expanding snack and convenience food options; restaurant menus adjusting to keep pace with the rise of single-person households and with it, solo diners; and a sustained focus on “well-being” foods (see Lee for a discussion of the greater “healing” and “well-being” context in relation to *Little Forest*, this volume), both traditional and globally influenced. South Korea's changing culinary desires have been reflected in media, including the rise of *meokbang* (“eating broadcasts”),<sup>25</sup> diversified cooking shows,<sup>26</sup> and food-centric variety shows.<sup>27</sup> In *The Recipe*, the TV journalist becomes obsessed with uncovering the secrets behind Hye-jin's *doenjang jjigae*, pursuing every lead to deep corners of South

Korea's countryside. Unsurprisingly, the journalist learns that Hye-jin grew up in Jeollado, the southwest region traditionally known for culinary abundance. The TV journalist at times engages in some gently comedic gender role swapping, such as when he eagerly takes notes at a fermented food workshop, the lone man in a sea of aproned housewives. In the end, the TV journalist is left without a reportable story, as the secret ingredient of Hye-jin's *doenjang jjigae*—which so enchanted a wanted criminal that he would rather have been captured by police than stop eating—was nothing but love. The region's delicious salt, spring water, and particular flora were all important elements of the stew, but it is Hye-jin's pure love for "the goblin" that stops the criminal in his tracks, makes a restaurant owner cry, and restores the senses of taste and smell of the CEO who comes to the restaurant. Indeed, the *doenjang* is so potent that it even preserves the bodies of the CEO and Hye-jin after the CEO drives his car into a ravine—in her final moments, on her way to visit the spot where she had told her lover she would wait for him, Hye-jin was carrying a large clay pot of her special *doenjang*. *The Recipe* reinvents the humble, strong-smelling *doenjang* to connect it with creativity, unconditional love, and sexual desire through the figure of Hye-jin.

While handmade food represents love and care in *The Recipe* and *Little Forest*, both films also interrupt the overplayed generational transmission tales common in food films worldwide, and in South Korean media featuring food more generally. Although Hye-won learns about food from her mother in *Little Forest*, her mother has notably only taught her these skills for Hye-won's own self-sufficiency and happiness. Her mother does not demand anything in return, although she hopes that the relationship they established through cooking and eating will help Hye-won to understand her mother's desire for self-realization away from the village. She does not mention, or even imply, that Hye-won should learn cooking for the sake of her future children, husband, or in-laws. Moreover, when Hye-won shares her food with childhood friends Jae-ha and Eun-sook, the gender dynamics are flexible—see Kwon, this volume, for an exploration of *Little Forest* as a queer narrative—and despite the understated mutual romantic interest between Hye-won and her male childhood friend Jae-ha, Yim does not allow this interpersonal dynamic to overwhelm the film at all. Hye-won and Jae-ha may or may not become a couple, and Hye-won's mother may or may not return. Ultimately, the love and care Hye-won shows for her friends through preparing food is inseparable from the love and care she develops for herself, and viewers can see Hye-won's growing satisfaction with herself in the many scenes in which she eats happily alone. Importantly, however, *Little Forest* cannot be collapsed into the Hollywood neoliberal female empowerment genre (as in the *Eat Pray Love* variety) or South Korean neoliberal "Candyrella" narratives (like TV dramas *Coffee Prince* or *My Name is Kim Sam-Soon*, among many others).<sup>28</sup> Hye-won discovers herself through

planting, harvesting, preparing, and eating food, but “herself” is as solidly connected to the village community as it is *not* dependent on patriarchal family and romantic relationships for sustenance.

The community-mindedness and abundance of female bonding scenes in *Little Forest*—whether of Hye-won with Eun-sook or in flashbacks to moments with her mother—is completely absent in *The Recipe*. Viewers first meet Hye-jin when she wanders to a restaurant in the countryside and begins working as well as lodging there. She and the woman who owns the restaurant are friendly with each other, and Hye-jin’s *doenjang jjigae* moves her to tears—however, Hye-jin does not work there long enough for true bonding to occur. When the journalist follows the clues back to the village where Hye-jin grew up, he learns that the area is famous for *meju*. An old woman in another village remembers Hye-jin’s arrival there, and her beautiful connection with the young *makkeoli* maker known as “the goblin,” and subsequent heartbreak when he did not return from Japan. Hamilton observes that Hye-jin “has devoted her life to serving the most delicious soup that will nurture and cure,” but it is romantic love that motivates her, rather than the sense of community found in *Little Forest*. Hamilton goes on to compare *The Recipe* with Lee’s earlier script for 301, 302, which featured two women, of which “one is obsessed with cooking and eating, using it as a substitute for sex and friendship; one is repulsed by the taste and smell of food



Figure 6.3 Hye-jin (*The Recipe*) waits for the *doenjang* to ferment while she waits for her lover to return

as an unwanted intrusion into her body.”<sup>29</sup> Hye-jin derives pleasure from the healing people obtain from her stew, but waits for her love to return forlornly, as everything else is subsumed by romantic love. *The Recipe* takes on mythological qualities, with the bean paste operating as a symbolic object between the mystical star-crossed couple. The *doenjang* endlessly ferments as Hye-jin waits, coming to represent a doomed love. In *Little Forest*, food sustains in the present and makes promises for the future, suggesting the possibility of love for Hye-won. However, this love is not limited to romantic love.

Another aspect of overlap between *Little Forest* and *The Recipe* is their strong dichotomy between instant/convenience foods vs. traditional/local foods. In *Little Forest*, the only time packaged foods are shown is in the flashback scenes of Hye-won’s time in Seoul. Hye-won also experiences the sting of rejection when she goes to deliver a handmade boxed lunch to her boyfriend while he is working, and overhears his friends commenting on how unusual this is in this day and age. When Hye-won hears her boyfriend say that he would rather she use the time she spends cooking for him to devote to her studies—and it would be easier for him just to buy something for lunch—she turns around without delivering the lunch, vowing never to express her care for him this way again. Back in her childhood home in the countryside, packaged snacks are entirely absent—even when *anju* (dishes to accompany alcoholic drinks) are needed when Hye-won and her friends drink her homemade *makkeoli*, Hye-won makes the crackers herself. The scene in which Hye-won’s acts of love via cooking are indirectly rejected by her boyfriend find a parallel in Lee Seo-gun’s earlier script for 301, 302, as one of the lead characters in that film is similarly rejected by her husband, who says he would prefer to eat Western fast food than eat his wife’s elaborate meals. This drives the woman to binge eat alone, a symptom of her loneliness. In *The Recipe*, Hye-jin’s food is never rejected, and “the goblin” lovingly caresses her hands, which are rough and dry from repeatedly handling the fermented beans (in order to transmit the important *sonmat*, or “taste of hands” that sets a food apart as homemade). The pungent, rustic *doenjang* becomes sensual. The contrast between convenience food and homemade food in *The Recipe* is illustrated through side characters: as the journalist goes deeper and deeper into experiences of fermented food culture in his quest to solve the *doenjang jjigae* mystery, other members of his team annoy him with their constant snacking. A detective friend “jams food into his mouth while talking on the telephone, eats from a bag of chips while working on his computer, slurps a small container of fast food during a phone call in the company cafeteria,”<sup>30</sup> and after visiting the restaurant where Hye-jin was previously employed the journalist snaps “you just ate!” at a member of the camera crew who whines that she is hungry. Unlike Hye-jin’s *doenjang jjigae*, these other foods that are made carelessly or are mass produced simply cannot fill a person up properly.

Several South Korean food trends make their way into the food media landscape of which *The Recipe* and *Little Forest* are a part; “well-being,”<sup>31</sup> traditional revival and buy-local movements (encompassed by the slogan *shin to bul yi*, or “the body and land cannot be separated”) are present in *The Recipe*, and a *meokbang* and v-log aesthetic combine with overall greater eco-awareness in *Little Forest*. Several other highly successful recent South Korean films prominently feature food—and the senses involved in preparing and eating food—most notably *Extreme Job* (dir. Lee Byeong-heon, 2019) and *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2019). Ryu Seung-ryong, who plays the TV news journalist to maximum comedic slapstick effect against the tragic love story in *The Recipe*, reprises this comedic slapstick mood as an undercover cop in *Extreme Job*, the second top-grossing South Korean film of all time (as of 2021). In *Extreme Job* the ultimate fast food, Korean fried chicken, takes center stage. Undercover cops trying to bust a drug lord buy a fried chicken restaurant as their cover, but then are hampered in their mission by the restaurant’s unexpected success. Here, too, unconventional recipes play a key role, as one of the cop’s family recipes creates an unanticipated culinary sensation, spread far and wide by social media. In *Parasite*’s tale of social inequality another unconventional dish illustrates the widely divergent experiences and expectations of rich and poor: *jjapaguri* (translated in the English subtitles as “ram-don,” and created through mixing instant noodle brands Chapagetti black bean noodles and Neoguri ramen). When wealthy Mrs. Choi (Yeon-gyo) asks her housekeeper (Park Chung-sook) to make the instant dish, she confuses Chung-sook utterly by telling her to add *hanu* (expensive Korean sirloin beef). The hybrid recipe is a slap in the face to Chung-sook, showing her the extent of the Park family’s wealth and their blatant conspicuous consumption (during a scene in which her family are in hiding around the mansion, in danger of being caught in their scam when the Park family returns early from a weekend excursion). The incongruous melding of the cheap, accessible instant noodles with the expensive beef constitutes a “culinary crime,” and in part this is because the cheap/instant and the expensive/local—for *hanu* is nothing if not prized as hyper-local—collide in one dish. If the fried chicken restaurant in *Extreme Job* is a setting and *jjapaguri* is a symbol in *Parasite*, *doenjang* and *doenjang jjigae* in *The Recipe*, and the various local creations in *Little Forest* connect women and food in far more substantial ways.

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## CONCLUSION

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At the end of *Little Forest*, Hye-won returns to the countryside house in the spring. Before she left in the winter, she plucked a dried persimmon from its drying rack in front of the house, savoring its sweetness but resolving to leave

to try to make it in Seoul again anyway. When she returns in spring, she does not look defeated, but rides vigorously around the village on her bicycle. A wide shot again treats viewers to the lush countryside landscape, appearing that much wider after shots of Hye-won's cramped apartment in Seoul and her view of the crowded city skyline. When she gets back to the house, she notes that the door is open and the curtains flutter in the breeze, and a smile spreads across her face. She walks in slow motion toward the door, with the expectation created that her mother is at last waiting inside. The food Hye-won has made throughout the film is visually linked to the countryside landscape, and as she approaches the house, faint sounds are heard from the kitchen. The care of the community for Hye-won, and Hye-won's care for the community, connect in a sensuous circle of tastes, smells, sounds, and textures.

At the end of *The Recipe*, Hye-jin's story is already finished, and the journalist tells the camera what was in the magical *doenjang*:

a clay pot into which plum blossoms have fallen, salt dried by the sun and stored over time, beans cultivated by a wild boar piglet, water from deep in the mountain, malt from plum wine, the sound of crickets, sunshine, wind, and tears . . . And as for how to make it? You wait.

The journalist has visited the potter to ask about the clay pot, and has tasted the salt and water; in flashbacks viewers have seen Hye-jin's addition of malt bestowed by her beloved, and finally her tears while she waits. The natural world has also contributed, with a young boar disturbing the beans and close-up shots of crickets making music on the *meju*. In the end only the natural world is left, with all the people at the core of the story gone. Without love, there is no food. Despite the many differences between *Little Forest* and *The Recipe*, and the different paths taken by the directors, both in the end affirm connections between women, land, food, and the senses. Hye-won's and Hye-jin's *sonmat* ("taste of hands") in their cooking is not in service to tradition, but rather self-realization, community, and love. The same can be said of the hands and minds behind the cameras, as Yim and Lee have forged new paths for female filmmakers in South Korea and stretched the existing boundaries of filmmaking.

## NOTES

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1. Yim's 2018 film is an adaptation of the Japanese film of the same name, directed by Junichi Mori. The Japanese version was produced in two parts, with "Spring/Summer" released in 2014 and "Fall/Winter" in 2015. Mori's film was itself an adaptation of a manga by Daisuke Igarashi, serialized 2002–2005.
2. Cynthia Baron, *Appetites and Anxieties: Food, Film, and the Politics of Representation* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2014).

3. Jee Hee Kim and Jai Suk Bang, “Yeonghwa *Riteul Poresteu* sok kongganjeok teukseonghwa uimi e daehan gochal” [Contemplation on the Spatial Characteristics and Meaning of Hometown in the Movie *Little Forest*: Focusing on the return to rural communities], *Wonkwang Journal of Humanities* Vol. 20, no. 3 (December 2019): 299–324. Yong-hee Kim, “Yeonghwa *Riteul Poresteu* e natanan siganui uimiwa keu yeonghwa hyeongsikjeok guhyeon e daehan yeongu” [A Study on the Meaning of Time and Its Formal Embodiment in the Film *Little Forest*], *Asia Yeonghwa Yeongu* [Asian Film Research] Vol. 12, no. 1 (March 2019): 87–112.
4. Julia Mayer, “Animal Magnetism: On South Korean Director Yim Soon-Rye,” *Metro Magazine* 171, 2012, 58–62.
5. Gwi-eun Han, “Yim Soon-rye yeonghwa e natanan dongsidaeseonggwa cheongnyeon kaenyemui sesokhwa” [The Contemporaries and Profanation of Young Adult in the Films Directed by Lim Sun-Rye], *Baedalmal* Vol. 62 (June 2018): 203–30.
6. For a comparison of Mori’s and Yim’s adaptations, see: Eun-Kyung Chin, “Ilsangseongeuro bon nongchonyeonghwa bigyo Hangukgwa Ilbonui *Riteul Poresteu* reul jungshimeuro” [Comparison of rural films from quotodiennete focusing on *Little Forest* from Korea and Japan], *Literature and Environment* Vol. 19, no. 1 (March 2020): 101–27.
7. Yim’s *Little Forest* is filmed in the rural area of Misoengri, in Gyeongbuk province. In Hye-won’s voiceover toward the beginning of the film, we learn that the village is so remote that there are no convenience stores or other shops, and Hye-won must ride her bike to get to stores or the outdoor market. In contrast, Mori’s adaptation follows the manga’s setting of remote northern Tohoku prefecture in Japan. Tohoku often signals economic and social marginalization in Japanese literature and film, and this long-standing marginalization took on even greater poignancy after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in March 2011. Fukushima is in Tohoku, and many suspected that the Japanese government covered up the extent of the damage *because* it took place in Tohoku. The setting of Gyeongbuk in the Korean adaptation does not signal marginalization in the same way, as historically it was the southwest (Jeolla) rather than southeast (Gyeongbuk) that was marginalized from the center. In the late 2010s, there is a relatively weaker sense of regionalism in South Korea, but instead a wide divide between the Seoul metropolitan area and everywhere else.
8. Kitae Kwon, “Olcho debwijak champae, yuhakpa yeonghwa gamdok 2inui gago” [Crushing defeat of debut films at the beginning of this year, the resolve of two overseas film directors], *Donga Ilbo*, 5 March 1998, <<https://www.donga.com/news/People/article/all/19980305/7326944/1>> (last accessed 1 June 2021).
9. It should be noted that Lee had particular connections to the South Korean film industry via her mother, novelist-turned-businesswoman Kim Sukyoung (who founded the publishing house Yeoleumsa) and father Lee Sang-ho, doctor and head of Woolideul Hospital. Lee’s parents invested in director Jang Jin’s “Digital Chat” project prior to his producing *The Recipe*. As of 2021, Lee Seo-gun is listed as the representative of Yeoleumsa publishing house. <<https://news.join.com/article/2943214>> (last accessed 4 June 2021).
10. Djuna, “*Doenjang* (2010),” *Djuna Yeonghwa Nakseopan*, 18 October 2010, <<http://www.djuna.kr/xe/review/937588>> (last accessed 3 March 2021).
11. Seongjin Hwangbo, “Dansun ‘eumsik yeonghwa’ga anine” [It’s not a pure ‘food movie’], *The Minjok Medicine News*, 19 October 2010, <<https://www.mjmedi.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=19953>> (last accessed 28 May 2021).
12. In-young Nam, “Korean Women Directors,” in *Korean Cinema from Origins to Renaissance*, ed. Mee Hyun Kim (KOFIC, 2007), 164.
13. Mayer, “Animal Magnetism,” 60.
14. Darcy Paquet, “The (few) women breaking through in Korean cinema,” *British Film Institute* (BFI.org), 3 August 2017, <<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/women-korean-cinema>> (last accessed 5 May 2021).

15. Ibid.
16. Juhyeon Lee, “Dansunhago sunsuhago kusuhan masi becoinneun yeonghwa ‘Doenjang’” [*The Recipe*, a film that supports a simple, pure and delicate taste], *Cine21*, 20 October 2010, <[http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag\\_id=63187](http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag_id=63187)> (last accessed 15 May 2021).
17. Hajin Choi, “Doenjang (The Recipe, 2010),” *Inside Seocho*, 30 July 2019, <<http://www.insideseocho.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=4570>> (last accessed 17 May 2021).
18. Yumi Lee, “Yeonghwa ‘Doenjang’ Jang Jin kamdok sigan + kongryeok bulgu doenjangjijigae e jeongsini pallin nameoji. . .” [In the film “The Recipe,” despite director Jang Jin’s time and effort, it remains just a preoccupation with bean stew], *Jeonbuk Domin Ilbo*, 17 May 2019, <<https://www.domin.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=1243571>> (last accessed 23 May 2021).
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20. See <<https://www.timeout.com/movies/rub-love>> (last accessed 5 May 2021).
21. Mayer, “Animal Magnetism,” 60.
22. David Sutton, “Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home,” in *The Taste and Culture Reader*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (New York: Berg, 2005), 312.
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30. Hamilton, “Appetite and Aroma,” 274.
31. Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).