

# From Strange Bitter Concoction to Romantic Necessity: *The Social History of Coffee Drinking in South Korea*

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the notions of Korean, American, and global identities as shared among Koreans by examining coffee drinking practices and the meanings associated with them. This research shows that coffee drinking is a useful window through which to view the diverse dimensions of contemporary Korean society, and produces and represents various identities of Koreans in the global world. As this research into the case of the Starbuck espresso chain demonstrates, the expansion of multinational business as part of the process of globalization and global business' interaction with indigenous cultures clearly show us how "universalization of particularism" and "particularization of universalism," respectively, operate in the border-crossing of food cultures. Furthermore, the Korean consumption of Starbucks coffee is not only a simple or passive adoption of American consumption products but an active process of selecting and creating their own modes of consumption, and participating in constructing a "global modernity." But the "globality" that is put together and constructed in an American way, as is the case with Starbucks, is already quite familiar and powerful for many Koreans.*

**Keywords:** coffee, consumption, identity, South Korea, globalization, Starbucks

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### Introduction: Consumption, Identity, and Global Modernity

“Espresso is still too strong and bitter for me. Any advice for learning how to enjoy it?” wrote a young woman in her twenties on the message board of a coffee aficionados’ cyber community on the Internet. A man in his eighties, who had been confined to a small island without running water or electricity for three days due to the severe flood of 2003, told a TV reporter that what he most wanted at the moment was a cup of piping hot coffee. As illustrated in these two examples, coffee has become a regular part of Korean culinary culture in many different forms. Why does the above-quoted young woman want to “learn” to be able to enjoy espresso, rather than be content with drinking instant coffee, with which she was probably already familiar and even enjoyed? What satisfaction does a cup of coffee give to the man, so that he wants it more than anything else after three days’ deprivation? One thing that is very clear is that, just over 100 years since the introduction of coffee to Korean society, coffee drinking has become an important part of Korean food culture. This paper explores the notions of Korean, American, and global identities as shared among Koreans by examining coffee drinking practices and the meanings associated with it. Through this paper, I will show that coffee drinking is a useful window that opens onto diverse dimensions of contemporary Korean society, and produces and represents various Korean identities in the global world.

To be precise, coffee is not just “American,” although the United States is highly relevant to coffee drinking in today’s Korean society. Coffee beans are mainly produced in the “third world,” including Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, while coffee drinking was popularized and sophisticated in many Arab societies, Turkey, and later, European societies. Yet, the United States is currently the largest importer and processor of coffee beans, and is also leading the worldwide trend of the coffee retailing business involving multinational espresso chains. In particular, the history of coffee drinking in Korea is closely associated with the United States. It was only with the wide availability of instant coffee powder taken from U.S. mili-

tary bases during and after the Korean War that a large number of Koreans started to enjoy coffee and later became regular drinkers. Today’s instant coffee market, which makes up over 90 percent of the total coffee consumption in Korea, is a battleground for well-known American brand names. Until recently, as in some Southeast Asian countries, many Koreans have simply used those brand names to refer to coffee in general. Freshly-brewed coffee was popularized among Koreans when extremely weak “American” coffee started to be sold at downtown coffee shops. Espresso drinking, which will be one of the focal subjects in this paper, started to spread amongst the general public when “Starbucks,” a large American-based espresso chain, brought its business to Korea in the late 1990s. For these reasons, coffee drinking in Korea is a consumption of the foreign, which is the opposite of consuming the indigenous. Moreover, it is a consumption of the Western, and more specifically, that of American culture. The introduction of Starbucks espresso cafes into Korean society, at a time when coffee’s foreign identity was thinning, brought in the coffee-drinking culture of contemporary middle and upper-middle class Americans, which was somewhat new to the majority of Korean society. The consumption of this new version of American culture contributed to producing and representing new identities of Koreans.

Analyses of consumption are an important part of the discourse on the identities of individuals and societies.<sup>1</sup> Consumption in today’s world, where choices are more plentiful than ever, represents identities that an individual currently has, aspires to have in the future, or wants to represent to other members of society. In particular, the consumption of food, which literally becomes a part of our body, is saturated with meanings and symbolisms. For these reasons, the consumption of food has been dealt with as an important part of consumption studies from a number of angles: 1) individual and group identities (Appadurai 1988b; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993; Mintz 1996; Tam 1997); 2) implications

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1. For a comprehensive discussion of food and consumption in Korea, refer to Kim K. (1994).

for social relationships in eating alone or together (commensality) (Watson 1997; Buckster 1999); 3) the relationship between cuisine and social classes (Goody 1982; Roseberry 1996); 4) the role of food in the dynamics of the global political economy (Bestor 2001; Stone 2002); and 5) food in the ecological system (Harris 1985).

The focus of this paper—coffee—is especially rich in meanings and symbolisms, partly due to the fact that it belongs to a category of specialty food, rather than essential staples. In other words, throughout the history of coffee drinking, people have constantly imagined, constructed, negotiated, and refuted stories about “why we need to drink, or refuse to drink coffee, and how, when, and with whom it should be drunk.” These stories often tell us what coffee is to us, and who we are in our diverse relationships with coffee. In addition, the expansion of multinational business as part of the process of globalization, and global business’ interaction with indigenous cultures clearly show us how “universalization of particularism” and “particularization of universalism,” respectively, operate in the border-crossing of food culture (Locher 2003). The expansion of multinational espresso chains, as is the case with Starbucks in the Korean market, can be viewed in this context. We can observe the dynamic process of a particular culture of an area being globally spread, while it is constantly modified reflecting the particular nature of each local society. The interactive nature of this process presents us a strategic locus for a discourse on identities. In this paper I will argue that coffee consumption in Korean society is not simply an act of passive acceptance of foreign culture, but a way to actively achieve “global modernity.” Furthermore, Koreans not only situate themselves in the course of global modernity or accept it as part of their identities but actively “participate” in the process of constructing global modernity. Coffee drinking in Korea shows several important characteristics of globalization, including universalization, particularization, and hybridization. It is obvious that in this process the participants do not share equal amounts of power, and for this reason understanding the role of the United States in this process as the indisputable leader and standard-setter is essential.

The research methods used in this research project are as follows: 1) participant observation in various locations related to coffee consumption (2003-2004), including a variety of coffee shops and cafes (especially Starbucks stores in various locations), coffee-retailing stores, vending machine areas, private homes and offices, 2) in-depth interviews with 80 people—consumers, specialists, marketing specialists, and those who are related to the processing, retailing, and consuming of coffee (2003-2004), 3) an analysis of essays written by 147 college students on the Korean, American, and global components of their identities (November 2003 and April 2004), and finally 4) a literature analysis.

### Coffee Drinking in Korea

#### *The Introduction of Coffee*

Coffee was first introduced to Korea a little more than 100 years ago, and its consumption has grown significantly enough to make South Korea the 13th largest coffee drinking country in the world, importing 1.1 percent of the world’s coffee beans (Moon 2003). King (later Emperor) Gojong, who had full powers to rule Korea from 1873 to 1907, is known to be the first Korean who drank coffee regularly. He acquired a taste for the drink when he was in exile at the Russian Embassy in Seoul, a time when Korea was experiencing instability facing foreign influence. Emperor Gojong also helped with the opening of the first coffee shop in Seoul by a German-born woman named Sontag. This place was popular among some upper class Koreans at the time. During the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945), there were Japanese-style *kkikdajeom* (喫茶店, tea houses) located mainly in downtown Seoul where intellectuals and artists spent their time over coffee. It was only with the availability of powdered instant coffee as part of American military ration food during and after the Korean War (1950-1953) that a significant number of Koreans started to enjoy coffee. Although it was illegal, this instant coffee was sold in

black markets, and steadily increased the number of Koreans who learned to enjoy it. Several informants in this research recollected that they first experienced coffee from a packet included in American military ration boxes, and most of them suffered from its bitter taste and stimulating effect (Yi 2003). In 1970, the Korean government's weariness over the illegal trade of foreign goods, and the business opportunity to cash in on Koreans' newly acquired taste for coffee led to the establishment of a domestic coffee processing plant to produce "Maxwell House Coffee," with the technological assistance by the General Foods, Inc. in the United States. In subsequent years several more processors joined in instant coffee production, and the fierce competition among these local producers have helped make Korea the "kingdom of instant coffee."

#### *The "Kingdom of Instant Coffee"*

The Korean instant coffee market is unique in that its commercials feature top stars, and the product is portrayed as a romantic and glamorous item. Flavor-enhancing technology has also evolved significantly. For instance, although the freeze-drying method, which is regarded as far more advanced than the spray-drying method in capturing fresh coffee flavor, was first developed in the United States, it was in Korea where the technology was stabilized for mass production. Coffee mix sticks, hugely popular in Korea for their convenience, have even evolved to allow consumers to adjust the amount of sugar in each cup. As of 2003, the proportion of instant coffee in the Korean market was over 90 percent, while in most other countries it never surpassed 20 percent. Many informants in this research, especially those who are over 40, said that they prefer the flavor of instant coffee to freshly-brewed.

The convenience of instant coffee has helped to boost the overall popularity of coffee consumption among Koreans. If Koreans had had to go to a lot of trouble to prepare coffee, they might not have drunk so many cups of it. Their preference for instant coffee also allowed for the acceptance of coffee vending machines, which is often regard-

ed as undrinkable by some consumers in other societies. Also, the stimulating effect of coffee was well suited to many Koreans during the 1960s and 1970s, when the entire nation was geared to achieve rapid economic development. Many Koreans, including students and workers, needed strong stimulants to keep themselves awake through hard work. For these reasons, a hot cup of sweet coffee replaced *sunngnyung* (the thin gruel made from scorched rice at the bottom of the pot, which had been traditionally drunk after each meal) for many Koreans.

#### *Increasing Consumption of Freshly-Brewed Coffee*

Around the time of the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the number of Koreans who drank freshly brewed coffee increased significantly, and this came to be considered a more sophisticated way of drinking coffee. A heavily watered-down version called "American coffee" was sold, and artificially flavored varieties (especially hazelnut) also became popular. Coffee drinking in Korea experienced yet another significant change when an American-based espresso chain, "Starbucks," opened its first store in Korea in 1999. Starbucks popularized espresso-based coffee made from fully-roasted arabica beans, and coffee drinking has become a more sophisticated and expensive experience for young and/or middle and upper-middle class Koreans who are willing to spend more money on coffee. Starbucks' business in Korea will be discussed in detail in the next chapter in the context of the interplay of Korean, American, and global identities.

#### *Coffee Aficionados*

Some Koreans claim to be "coffee manias"[*sic*] who go to great lengths to find the perfect cup of coffee. Some insist upon drinking at particular coffee shops, and others go as far as roasting their own beans at home to secure the freshness of the flavor. Some are active on the Internet as members of cyber communities made up of fellow coffee aficionados. There are over eighty such communities (only

counting those known), and the largest<sup>2</sup> has over 8,000 members. The members of such communities regularly correspond with one another, exchanging information and experiences, and also hold off-line meetings, where on average about 50 members attend. For those who want to gain specialized knowledge about coffee and coffee-drinking, there are many schools, including cultural education classes offered for a fee by large department stores. Some junior colleges have independent academic departments for people who want to pursue careers in coffee-related businesses.

### *Some Resistance to Coffee Drinking*

Occasionally there have been social campaigns against coffee drinking due to the foreign origin of the drink. Coffee was contrasted with domestic beverages such as green tea or barley tea, and at the height of agricultural protectionism, the government “advised” (i.e., pressured) coffee houses to boost the sales of domestic drinks such as ginger, adlay, or citron tea. However, these attempts were never very successful. Domestic drinks are also available at the ubiquitous coffee vending machines, but their sales are minimal compared to that of coffee varieties. Recently, the so-called “well-being” trend in Korean society raised the popularity of green tea for its healthful effects, and its consumption is on the rise. Several informants in this research stated that they “try” to drink more green tea for health reasons, but “enjoy” coffee for its flavor.

## **Starbucks in Korea: American or Global?**

### *Starbucks in the Korean Market*

As part of their global expansion efforts, many multi-national coffee shop chains have opened stores in Korea. Given the rapid increase in

2. [cafe.daum.net/coffeehouse](http://cafe.daum.net/coffeehouse).

espresso consumption in Korea, most of these chains have been successful. Among these, American-based chains include Starbucks, Seattle’s Best, and Coffee Bean,<sup>3</sup> while Lavazza hails from Italy, the birthplace of espresso. Some specialists say that the quality of the coffee is superior at Italian chain shops, but American ones are more successful due to their sophisticated marketing and management (Bak R. 2003). The most successful of the American chains is Starbucks, which had 112 stores in Korea as of January 2005. One of these stores in Myeongdong takes up the entire space of a four-story building in a prime location. This piece of land was appraised as the most expensive in all of Korea in 2004.<sup>4</sup> Starbucks Korea received the Presidential Award from its headquarters in the United States in 2001 for having become profitable in the shortest period of time ever. Starbucks Korea is jointly owned by the American headquarters and the Shinsegae Group, a Korean conglomerate. The Korean partner is in charge of regular management tasks and local marketing, while the American side takes care of brand image management and setting primary goals.

Starbucks is sometimes compared to the McDonald’s hamburger chain, because both expanded their businesses by creating demand for relatively new products. Early in their history, McDonald’s introduced standardized, fast food style hamburgers to consumers. However, the management at Starbucks is not happy with the comparison to McDonald’s, because they claim to be different. According to them, Starbucks does not only simply sell a product but provides an entire “experience” of coffee drinking. Furthermore, they argue, the Starbucks brand reflects the lifestyle that is desired by upper-middle class Americans. While expanding, Starbucks management is very keen to maintain the sophisticated and romantic image of the brand. For this reason, a comparison between Starbucks and the inexpen-

3. Although the full name is “Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf,” it was shortened for Korean consumers.

4. Starbucks stores in Korea are on average larger than those in most other countries for reasons that will be explained later in this chapter. In fact the three largest Starbucks stores in the world are all located in Korea.

sive, mass-market McDonald's is not happily accepted by management. On the one hand, the act of differentiating itself from McDonald's about maintaining the prestige of the brand, but on the other, it reflects the management's intention to justify the premium price of their products. As of spring 2005, Starbucks Korea is successfully familiarizing young and middle and upper-middle class Koreans with espresso drinking and take-out culture, although the latter is being embraced more slowly. In the case of Korean consumption of Starbucks coffee, we can observe the acceptance of American middle class culture and the exotification of the third world—the origin of coffee beans—filtered through and seasoned according to American tastes. This process also shows us the change in Koreans' attitude vis-a-vis things American; in the past, practically any product of U.S. origin was desired as a product of a prosperous society, while today, Koreans selectively desire things based on the socioeconomic class associated with the commodities. This is closely related to class differentiation within Korean society. Starbucks espresso is convenient for producing and representing the identities of middle class Koreans and the younger generation who grew up in relative prosperity.

The mainstream of Korean consumers at Starbucks are white collar workers in their 20s and 30s, and the ratio of women to men is approximately 6:4. When Starbucks first opened its stores in Korea in 1999, their target customers were college students, women, and those who had experienced travel abroad. Now that about six years have passed, many of those target customers have become white-collar workers. According to the management of Starbucks, one of the clear characteristics of Korean customers is that their orders tend to be very simple.<sup>5</sup> For instance, they would order "a regular-size cup of Cafe Latte." This order is quickly filled by simply adding steamed milk to espresso. When Starbucks started its business in Korea, there were only a few stores and the line was often several meters long all day. At that time, the simplicity of Korean customers' orders was helpful in meeting the huge demand. In contrast, one of the very rea-

5. Yang Jae-seon, Head of Marketing Team, July 2003.

sons why Starbucks was so successful in the United States was their ability and willingness to meet the individual needs of customers. American customers tend to be specific in their needs: caffeinated or decaffeinated; whole, low-fat, or skim milk; a desired temperature; the addition of flavored syrup, etc. The marketing manager at Starbucks at the time of this research expected that, in the long run, it would be helpful for the chain's continued popularity if customers learned to order specifically and enjoyed the customized products.

Many of those who were interviewed for this research said that they went to Starbucks more for its atmosphere than for the coffee. Many confessed that they could not tell the difference between the coffee sold at small espresso vendors and that of Starbucks. Therefore, some said, they would rather buy the less expensive one for take-out, and go to Starbucks when they want to meet someone, or read something over a cup. They were clearly aware that they pay more for the "place" or the "cultural experience" of Starbucks. Another reason often mentioned was that at Starbucks one could expect a standardized flavor of coffee, atmosphere, and service. Visiting a Starbucks store eliminates any uncertainty that is associated with trying unknown brands. This is similar to the consumers' expectation for even better known chain stores such as McDonald's. When traveling on highways or even in foreign countries, Americans often say they feel relieved when they see the familiar golden arches of McDonald's, knowing that they can expect standardized food with a familiar style of service. One female college student in this research said she was quite relieved when she saw the familiar green Starbucks sign in Malaysia, after feeling a bit weary of the unfamiliar local food. As shown in this example, for younger Koreans who have experienced foreign travel, Starbucks is an already familiar global brand.

For Koreans who are middle aged and older, Starbucks is often associated with youth culture. A woman in her fifties said that she always goes to Starbucks for coffee when she is accompanied by her children, who are in their 20s. However, she usually patronizes significantly less expensive coffee from vending machines when she is

with her friends. When she has to treat someone to coffee or meet someone important, she makes it a point to go to Starbucks, so as not to “lose face.” Another housewife in her 50s who lives in Busan expressed that she felt left out when her friends, who spent some time in the United States, talked about their life there, which included frequenting Starbucks stores in suburban malls. When a Starbucks store opened in Busan, she quickly became a regular customer and is now able to tell her friends, “I had a white chocolate mocha yesterday at Starbucks.” She says this somewhat lessens her sense of isolation. For Koreans who are middle aged and older, Starbucks seems to be a special place where they can experience youth culture and unfamiliar foreign culture. But it should be noted that for both younger and older generation Koreans, the Starbucks experience is mainly limited to middle-class citizens living in large cities.

Another characteristic of Korean Starbucks customers is that many of them come in to the stores to meet others rather than just for coffee. When customers come in as couples or groups, one person stands in line to order while the other(s) find a table. Due to this, and also due to the relative lack of take-out customers, Korean Starbucks stores need to provide more table space than in other countries, which drives up set-up costs. In contrast to stores in other countries, Korean Starbucks have more wooden chairs and tables, rather than sofas and coffee tables.

In American Starbucks stores, customers usually come in individually and stand in line. They easily strike up conversations with other customers or the service attendants (whom the management calls “partners”). In doing so, the customers create new social relationships while enjoying coffee. This reflects the company founder’s idea of Starbucks being a “third place,” in that it fulfills certain functions that homes and work places normally do not. The founder, Howard Schultz, thought of this when he observed neighborhood espresso bars in Italy, where people informally socialized with each other before and after work. But Korean customers rarely talk to other customers, and even with service personnel they only discuss their orders. This is related to Korean society’s lack of Western-style

party or bar culture, in which strangers meet each other and engage in conversation following common topics. For this reason, Korean customers consider the time they spend standing in line to be boring and even irritating. Korean customers also prefer a certain amount of privacy for their group, which is related to another unique feature of Korean Starbucks stores. In most places, there are partitions (which Starbucks calls “walls”) that visually and physically divide areas.

#### *Starbucks and Korea’s Younger Generation: Anti-Americanism and Some Practical Concerns*

Starbucks as a global firm is considered to be one of the popular potential employers by younger Koreans. For instance, the marketing manager interviewed in this research had been working at a large food company until he found an opportunity at Starbucks. He feels quite positive about his work experience at his current workplace. This perception is shared not only with the current employees of Starbucks, but with young job seekers as well. Young college students who are taking courses in business administration often consider Starbucks a good case about which to write term papers. As the end of the semester draws near, hundreds of e-mail messages from these college students are sent to the Starbucks office in Seoul seeking information on the company’s management. When the number was small, the company replied individually and provided the information solicited. Now that the number has increased significantly, the company finds it difficult to handle them individually and instead holds group seminars every other Saturday to provide information on company management and marketing strategies. Starbucks uses these opportunities to familiarize the younger generation, their most valued target consumers, with the brand. According to the marketing team, which is in charge of these seminars, they have observed a somewhat contradictory attitude among these college students. On the one hand, they seem to share some anti-American sentiments that are growing among younger Koreans, while on the other, they seem to have a strong desire to work at Starbucks in order to gain advanced

management skills and pursue better careers.

This dual attitude is similar to what was found in the essay survey conducted among 147 college students in November 2003 and April 2004 as part of this research. Although the research samples were not randomly selected for representation, this survey provided a valuable in-depth understanding into what these young college students think of the Korean, American, and global components of their constructed identities. According to the responses provided in these essays, to varying degrees, students shared some negative feelings on the American role in international politics. Some students formed this attitude when their high school teachers taught them about the role the United States played in recent Korean history. For other students, their ideas were influenced by their seniors in college (*seonbae* 先輩) after consciousness-raising sessions conducted during group stays in rural villages to help out farmers. Even some students who had exhibited favorable or neutral attitudes towards the United States developed negative feelings in the wake of several recent incidents: the awarding of the gold medal for short-track speed-skating to Anton Ono, an American, at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, instead of Kim Dong-seong, a Korean skater, who many felt should have received the medal; American actions, or the lack thereof, after two Korean school girls were killed in an accident involving an American military vehicle near an American base; lastly, American pressure on Korea to send troops to Iraq. On the other hand, the same students revealed that they felt quite comfortable with American consumption culture. Many of them confessed that they really liked American products, including popular culture and global brand goods, and sometimes feel frustrated by the contradiction between their political attitude and consumption choices.

Another remarkable aspect of the results of the aforementioned essay survey is that, for many students, the United States is an important part of their future career plans. Many students mentioned the importance of the English language in achieving career success. For this reason, many either spent some time learning the language in the United States or other English-speaking countries, or had plans

to do so. Even those who expressed their hatred of the United States admitted the need to speak English fluently in order to work and succeed in a globalizing world. For the sake of their future career plans, many students expressed a desire to work at American-based global firms, and five of them even expressed their wish to emigrate to the United States, given the proper opportunities. Since the format of the essays was quite open, the fact that so many students revealed their plans involving the US in such detail means that the United States is a very important part of their current life and future plans. This resonates with what the marketing manager at Starbucks indicated about the dual nature of the students' attitude toward Starbucks. Starbucks may be one of the targets of anti-American campaigns, but still it is an attractive place for career development. In both ways, Starbucks is "good to think" (Lévi-Strauss 1970).

#### *The American and the Global at Starbucks*

Starbucks is often used as a model global business for its successful and innovative management. Its founder and current CEO, Howard Schultz, is regarded as a symbol of the American Dream, as someone who overcame the hardships of growing up in a slum, and later achieved his dream through self-motivation and hard work. As stated in detail in Schultz's autobiography (Schultz and Yang 1997), Starbucks expanded rapidly while teaching mainstream Americans the Italian culture of drinking espresso. For instance, the menu at Starbucks stores mainly consists of the exotic-sounding names of the third world coffee growing regions and Italian words describing the methods of coffee preparation, while containing very few English words. For this reason, when Starbucks first opened, even well-educated Americans had a hard time ordering their coffee, and this was used as a source of jokes to ridicule snobbish yuppie culture. Behind Starbucks' commercial success lies a combination of American business culture (standardized and rational management and marketing), European food culture (an espresso-making method that brings out intense flavor and espresso bars serving important social functions),



and the remote third world origins of coffee beans. As of the end of 2004, Starbucks had 8,337 cafes in 39 countries in the world, and the number is rapidly increasing.

During this period of rapid growth, Starbucks has been struggling to satisfy the conflicting needs of maintaining a distinct overall brand image and adapting to the local culture of each society in which they open their stores. For instance, while they have more or less maintained the basic array of espresso-based coffee varieties, they also have added food and beverages that reflect local tastes. In the United States, where health concerns in food choices are important among middle-class target customers, nonfat or low fat milk and soymilk are made available. This is a clear departure from Schultz's initial plan to preserve the authenticity of Italian espresso and put taste as the first priority. As for the baked items sold with coffee, in American stores, they sell bagels with cream cheese and muffins, along with sweet, buttery pastries that Europeans often eat with their espresso. In the Insa-dong Starbucks in Korea, some Korean snack items were added to the menu, such as pumpkin soup and red bean soup, among others.

When there were a series of anti-American demonstrations in late 2002, Starbucks, along with McDonald's, became one of the prominent targets for consumer boycotts.<sup>6</sup> Though this did not actually result in any significant decrease in sales, the marketing manager of Starbucks noted that the possibility of such a decrease made them feel as if they were walking on thin ice. To prevent any major setbacks, they felt they had no choice but to stick to the basics: employing business practices that respect local culture, working hard to offer community services, running an environmentally friendly business, and working to be a globally responsible corporation by practicing fair trade with third world coffee growers. In this process, Starbucks is trying very hard to represent the firm as "global" rather than "American." Given that many people tend to equate global with

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6. For analyses of anti-Americanism in Korea and the symbolic importance of McDonald's, refer to Bak S. (1997) and Bak S. (2004b).

American in today's world order, this strategy is not an easy one to practice. But the above concerns are more relevant in dealing with younger Koreans. For many Koreans who are in their 50s and older, Starbucks' status as an American company is looked upon positively. A woman in her 50s said, "Usually I have more trust in American firms. I have never thought about not buying anything because it is an American product." In this context we can find a pertinent example of a generation gap in today's Korean society in their attitude towards the United States.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Starbucks in Insa-dong: Threat to the Korean Cultural Heritage?*

Starbucks opened a store in Insa-dong in 2001, overcoming fierce resistance by the neighborhood's shop owners. Those who opposed the plan to open a Starbucks in the area argued that a foreign-based coffee shop would taint Insa-dong's identity as the cradle of traditional Korean culture.<sup>8</sup> Behind this reason, they had practical concerns that Starbucks would lure away customers who used to visit traditional teahouses in the area. Through numerous negotiations and compromises, the store was opened, and the Starbucks management feels that their presence at the heart of traditional Korean culture was possessed of some important symbolic meaning. Starbucks' Insa-dong shop is quite unique in several regards. It is the only Starbucks with a Korean language signboard hung prominently on the store front, and it also has traditional wooden lattice patterns in its windows. Inside the shop, several markers of traditional culture, including wooden masks for dance, are hung prominently on the wall. Starbucks Korea had to persuade the American headquarters to be able to decorate the Insa-dong store this way. The attempt was assessed as quite successful, and the store was designated as the most beautiful

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7. For an extended discussion of the generation gap in attitudes towards the United States in Korean society, refer to Bak S. (2004a).

8. Food culture in Insa-dong is discussed in detail in Bak S. (2000), and the identity politics of Insa-dong as a place is discussed in Bak S. (1998).

Starbucks in 2001 by the American headquarters. To celebrate the opening, the store gave out traditional Korean rice cakes to its neighbors and customers, and its menu includes some distinctly “Korean” items. However, the marketing managers confessed that the actual sales volume of these items has been minimal, and they routinely have to throw away unsold food. Some Koreans are cynical about Starbucks’ attempt to “Koreanize” the Insa-dong store. According to them, hanging a few masks on the wall or adding pumpkin soup to the menu is only a superficial and cosmetic tribute to Korean culture of which Korean customers are quite aware of it. The hot controversy surrounding the Insa-dong Starbucks contains many critical issues and conflicts relevant to the process of globalization: traditional local culture versus global corporation, identity and cultural heritage, foreign espresso versus local green tea, English versus Korean sign board, and so on. The successful business of Insa-dong Starbucks serves as a useful marker with which to show the current state of Korean food culture and identity.

### **Coffee Drinking and Identities: The Possibility of “Global Modernity”**

The way we drink, or not drink, coffee helps inform us of who we are as both individuals and as members of a group. Whether we drink coffee instead of green tea or *sunngnyung*, and whether we prefer drinking certain types of coffee in particular places, may represent our class background and cultural capital among others. In the early period of coffee drinking in Korea, just the fact that someone drank coffee might have been sufficient grounds for “distinction” (Bourdieu 1984). In today’s Korea, there are more elaborate kinds of “distinction” involved in coffee drinking. Many Koreans are well aware of the mechanics of distinction, and some actively participate in this process. The young woman quoted at the beginning of this paper asked how she could practice what is perceived to be the most sophisticated way of drinking coffee without suffering from it. Some

informants in this research said that they drink freshly brewed coffee in public, but when they are at home they enjoy the familiar taste of instant coffee. The reason might be simply that of convenience, but it is also true that drinking instant coffee is viewed as a sign of backwardness and a low-class background. When Starbucks first introduced strong coffee made from fully roasted beans, many Koreans could not take it. Many simply added a large amount of hot water or milk. After six years of Starbucks having conducted business in Korea, many Koreans have learned to enjoy the strong taste. Among these various ways of drinking coffee, one can be intentionally chosen over others to construct identities recognized by others. As a private or public mode of consumption, coffee drinking plays an important and useful role in constructing the identities of many Koreans.

As Lévi-Strauss aptly put it, the raw ingredients of food are part of nature while cooked food is part of culture.<sup>9</sup> While coffee beans are part of “nature” in the hands of the growers, they enter the realm of “culture” when they are processed and packaged. Coffee drinkers may value the exotic, primitive, and diverse nature of raw coffee beans, but they pursue sophistication and scientific accuracy when it comes to coffee processing and retailing. Coffee beans accumulate thick layers of meanings as they travel from the hands of growers to those of the global dealers, processors, retailers, and finally to consumers (Appadurai 1988a). There are numerous ways to process and brew a cup of coffee reflecting the various tastes of people in the world, but obviously the dominance of European cuisine led by French and Italian traditions is quite marked, just as it is in other aspects of culinary culture. In specialty coffee drinking, middle and upper-middle class Americans seem to focus on two areas: finding good-quality beans and using sophisticated methods of making a perfect cup of coffee mostly following the Italian way. The global popularity of fusion food that started in the 1980s is a good illustration of cultural hybridization, and in most cases, the bases are of French and

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9. Lévi-Strauss (1970, 1973) and Gusfield (1992), for its adaptation to the Korean case, refer to Han (1994).

Italian origin, while the additional touch comes from other parts of the world (Bak S. 2003). In other words, it is only by being chosen as an accompaniment to more typical high cuisine from Italy and France that the exoticism of other foods can be appreciated as “good enough.”<sup>10</sup> The exotic aspects of coffee beans remain limited to their names of origin, but when they are delivered to Korean consumers, they are shrouded in Italian culinary culture and American business practices.

Starbucks was readily embraced by Korean consumers partly because it provided Italian authenticity processed in an American way, which was already quite familiar to many Koreans. Recently, new Starbucks stores have opened on the first floors of major office buildings, replacing bank offices, which typically took up these prime spaces. This is because of Starbucks’ ability to draw customers all day long, and the fact that the brand name is well recognized and serves as a landmark. Some smaller domestic espresso chains have even adopted Starbucks’ green color in their signboards, probably hoping to benefit from the recognition value of Starbucks. As I have emphasized thus far, Koreans’ consumption of Starbucks coffee is not a simple and passive adoption of American consumption products but an active process of creating their own modes of consumption, and participating in constructing “global modernity” that transcends the borders between cultures. But the “globality” that is put together and processed in an American way is already quite familiar and powerful for many Koreans as well.

10. Savigliano (1992) analyzed the process through which Argentinean Tango was only embraced in Japan after being first recognized in Britain.

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