

## Whale Food Culture in Korea : A Case Study in Ulsan Jangsaengpo

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## **Whale Food Culture in Korea: A Case Study in Ulsan Jangsaengpo**

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1. Introduction
2. History of the Use of Whales in the Korean Peninsula
  - 2.1 Every-day Relations of Koreans with Whales
  - 2.2 Whales as Oil Fields in the Sea
  - 2.3 Whales as the Medium between Eastern and Western Cultures
  - 2.4 Ulsan Becomes a Whaling Base of Russia and Japan
  - 2.5 Whaling Activities and the Distribution of Whale Meat in Ulsan Jangsaengpo
3. Whale Food Culture and the Identity of a Community
  - 3.1 How to Cook Particular Parts of Whale Meat
    - 3.1.1 Eating the Meat Raw
    - 3.1.2 Boiling
    - 3.1.3 Frying
    - 3.1.4 Stewing
    - 3.1.5 Grilling
  - 3.2 Gap in Recognition of Whale Food Culture
4. Regional Identity against Western-centric
5. Conclusion

### **Abstract**

Korea's whale food culture, centering in the Ulsan area, is based on historical factors, and today it is regarded as a source of the local identity to integrate people and their cultural resource. After the ban on whaling, local people confronted a situation where the whale food culture supporting their identity has faded owing to the influences of the Western-centric ideas that view culture only in the context of "barbarism versus civilization". However, they sustain whale food culture by using whales accidentally caught in fishing nets. This paper analyzes whale food culture in Korea from a historical

perspective to demonstrate its contribution to local social integration and the formation of community identity.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes whale food culture in Korea from a historical perspective to demonstrate its contribution to local social integration and the formation of community identity. Since 1986, when commercial whaling was banned by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), Koreans have eaten whales caught accidentally in fishing nets. Such whales numbered 190 in 2000, and 751 in 2008, and approximately 30% were minke whales and the balance were dolphins. The demand for whale meat is much greater than the supply, and since a whale is worth several million to ten million yen, depending on size, accidentally catching one is said to be like winning the sea lottery.

In 2006, there were 150 whale meat shops throughout the Republic of Korea, including 29 in Jangsaengpo village and some 50 in Ulsan City. Combined, these two municipalities account for more than 50% of the shops in Korea. Busan comes second with more than 30%, and Pohang and Seoul have 10% each.

In Ulsan, famous for whaling since the end of the 19th century, today about 80% of whales accidentally caught in fishing nets are sold. When a whale is accidentally caught like this, the maritime police swiftly inspect it. If nothing illegal is found, the whale is put up for auction by a local fishery cooperative, butchered, and supplied to Jangsaengpo village.

Following the commercial whaling ban, the population of Jangsaengpo, which lies at the interior end of Ulsan Bay, declined sharply from 15,000 to 1,500 inhabitants. To revitalize the village, the town administration is promoting tourism by providing facilities and services related to whales. These include a whale museum, a cetacean research institute, a whale-watching tour ship, and an aquarium featuring dolphins. Also, it is using the whale as the town's symbol in an effort to change its image from an industrial city to an environment-friendly place.

## 2. History of the Use of Whales in the Korean Peninsula

### 2.1 Every-day Relations of Koreans with Whales

A whale is termed "Gore" in the Korean language. Koreans are familiar with about 20 kinds of cetaceans, including eight kinds of baleen whale like the Pacific northern right whale, gray whale, fin whale, blue whale, sei whale, minke whale, humpback whale, and Bryde's Whale, plus two species of toothed whales, the sperm whale and Baird's beaked whale (Figure 1), in addition to several species of dolphin.

References to whales are frequent in Korean proverbs and place names. For instance, there is the proverb, "A shrimp loses in a fight between whales", meaning that a weaker person is damaged through involvement in a fight between two who are stronger. Another says "Someone caught a shrimp in a net set to catch a whale" means that a person fails to obtain good results, contrary to his/her expectations.

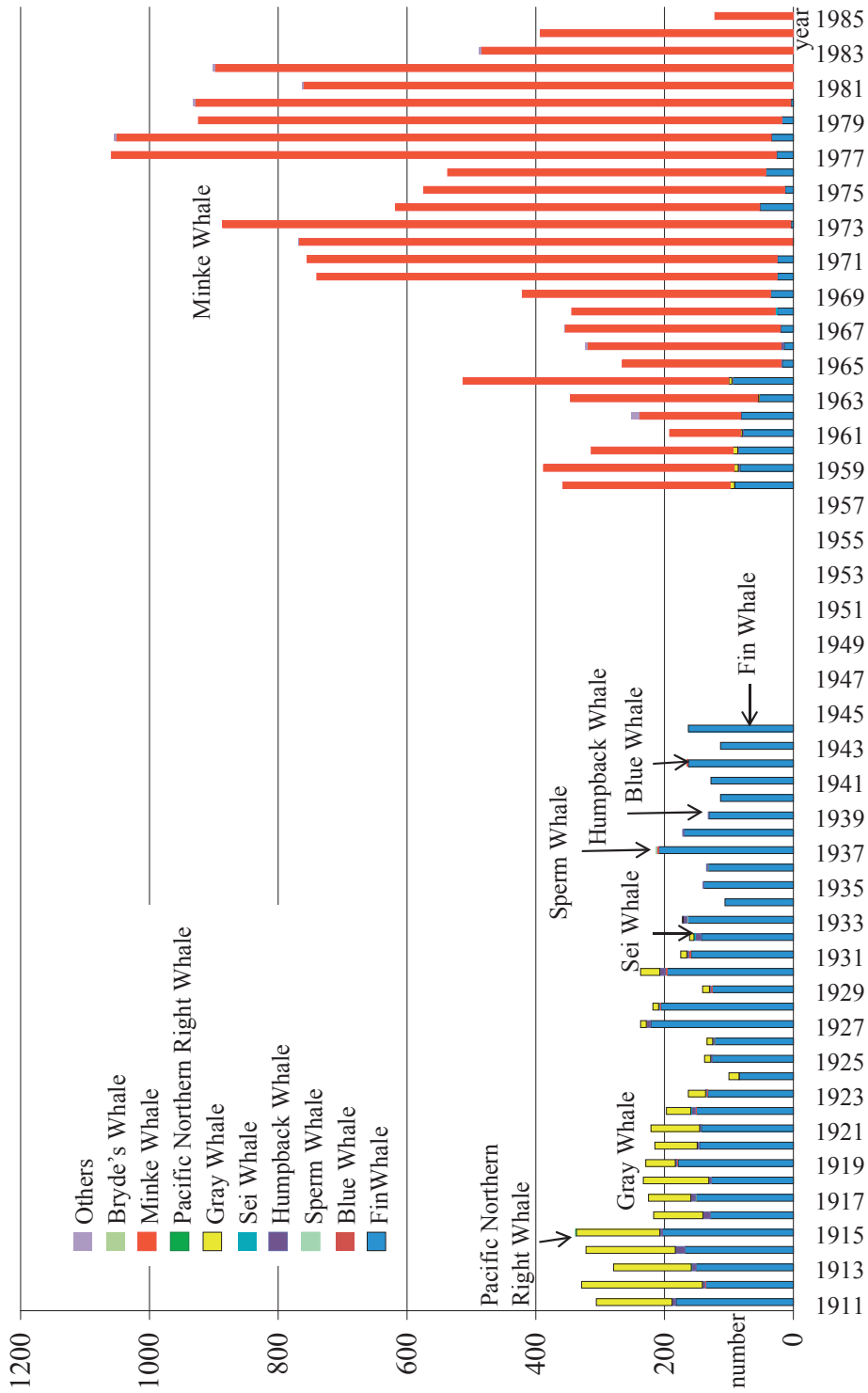


Figure 1 Changes in whale species use and the catch by year (1911-1985)

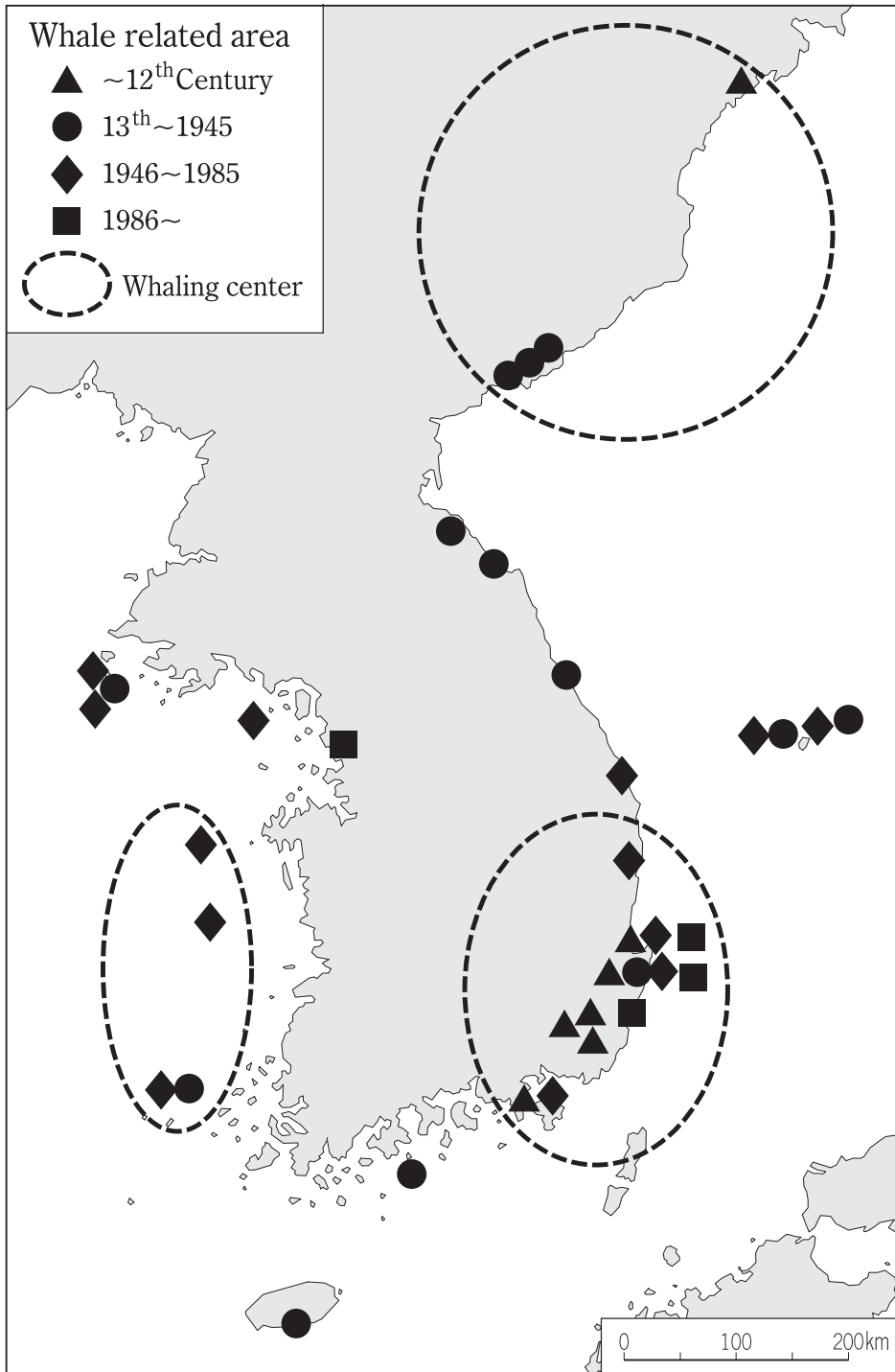


Figure 2 Whale related areas

There are folk beliefs related to whales. For example, some families along the west coast of Korea do not eat whales, because they believe that in the past some fishermen in a fierce storm were saved by a whale that pushed their damaged boat to the coast. So, their descendants have not eaten whale meat ever since. Another example is that in Korea heavy drinkers are called “alcohol whales”. As these proverbs, anecdotes, and beliefs indicate, whales have been observed closely in daily life for many generations, and are regarded as familiar animals by ordinary Koreans.

## 2.2 Whales as Oil Fields in the Sea

From ancient times there have been major whaling grounds both in the East and West seas off the Korean Peninsula (Figure 2). There is also abundant pre-historic material on whales. Three examples are fossils of dolphins estimated to be 13 million years old excavated in Pohang, North Gyeongsang Province, whale bones from Neolithic shell mounds in Busan and North Hamgyeong Province, and Neolithic drawings of about 50

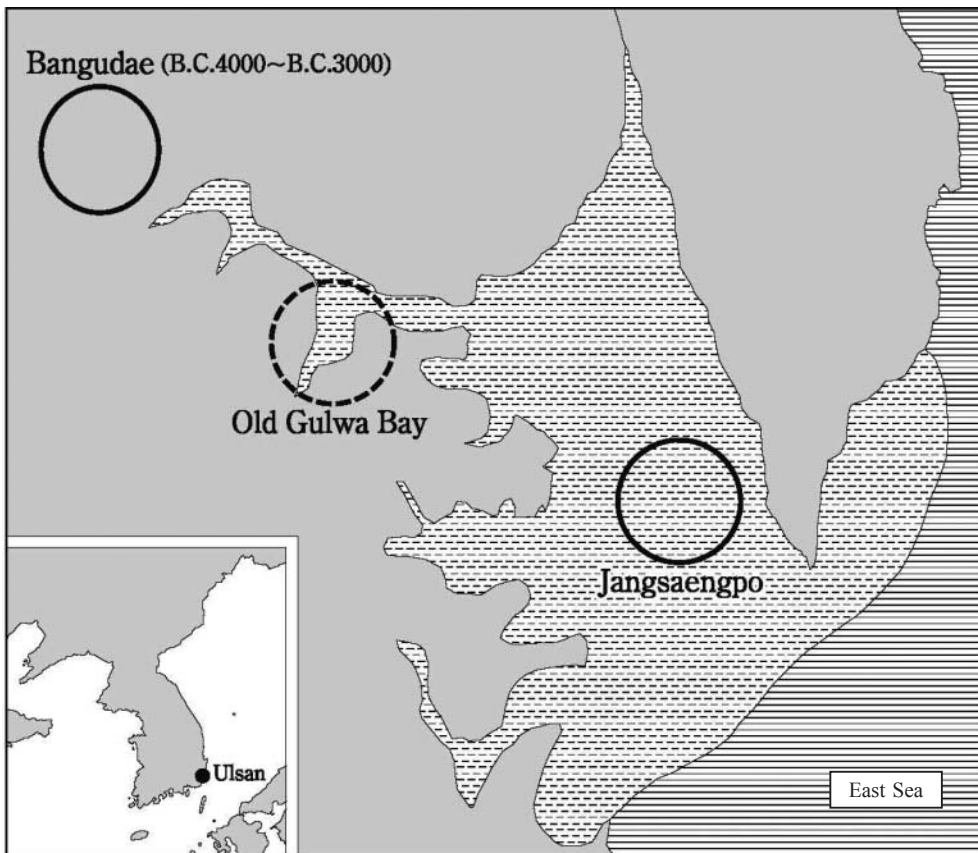


Figure 3 Locations of Jangsaengpo Ulsan and Bangudae rock carvings

kinds of cetaceans and whaling activities engraved on the rocks in Daegongni Bangudae, Ulsan, about 24km northwest of Jangsaengpo (Figure 3). These examples imply how whales were used as food, for oil and, among other things.

Whales are particularly abundant in the East Sea, which is also referred to as the “Whale Sea”. However, since the 5th Century when Buddhism became the national religion, there are very few records of whaling, apart from the many descriptions of taking oil from stranded whales. Among them is a record that during the 13th Century the Yuan Dynasty of China demanded whale oil in Gyeongsang Province. Also the 18th Century’s “Yeongjosillok” (1747) and the 19th Century’s “Imwongyeongjeji” (1820) depicted how contemporary government officials mobilized farmers to butcher a whale found on the coast, but then monopolized the profits. As these records show, whales were considered an important resource for oil production. When a dead whale was found, officials forced the local people to work on it. Thus the people called the whale “Gore” (lit. “pains come”), and the impoverishment and exhaustion of local people by corrupt officials’ evil-doing was viewed as a “whale war”. However, because a stranded or dead whale became monopolized and exploited by officials, it indicates that they were viewed as national properties, and that organized whaling activities had not been developed by local fishermen in Korea.

In an essay written by Nicolaas Witsen, a Dutchman who drifted to Jeju Island in 1653, there is an account that Korean fishermen used long harpoons, similar in shape to Japanese harpoons. From this it is inferred that there must have been whaling activities in southern Korea (Park 1987: 74).

### **2.3 Whales as the Medium between Eastern and Western Cultures**

Since the 1840’s, whaling ships came to the East Sea off the Korean Peninsula from America, France, and Germany to hunt sperm whales for oil. When the number of whales decreased drastically, they switched to hunting Pacific Northern Right Whales that were found there in abundance. America, in particular, sent many whaling ships, which numbered 736 in 1846, and 635 in 1856. When petroleum was discovered in 1859, the importance of whale oil declined greatly and the industry eventually collapsed. After the US Civil War ended in 1865, the number of whaling ships from America decreased dramatically to 263 in 1866 and 42 in 1906. From 1841 to 1850, American whaling ships caught about 1,500 whales, but they caught only 385 between 1851 and 1861. During the latter period, Pacific Northern Whales were in danger of extinction (Park 1987: 131–153).

### **2.4 Ulsan Becomes a Whaling Base of Russia and Japan**

With the introduction of Norwegian whaling techniques, in 1880, several Russian whaling companies started operations in the East Sea off the Korean Peninsula. Among them, the Russian Pacific Whaling Company obtained licenses in 1899 from the Korean dynasty to secure whaling bases in Jangsaengpo Bay and Jangjeon Bay, Gangweon Province, and Mayang Bay, Hamgyeong Province, where they could process whales soon after they were hunted in the East Sea. The Russian whaling operation consisted of a fleet made up of a whaling ship, a carrier, a ship for butchering, and an ordinary ship. Crews were

recruited from several countries. Besides a Russian captain, there were Norwegian harpooners, and seamen from Baltic countries, Japan, Korea, China, Germany, and elsewhere. Primarily, they hunted fin whales to sell whalebone and oil to the UK and salted and canned meat to Nagasaki, Japan. During the whaling seasons, whale meat traders from both Japan and Korea gathered in Jangsaengpo.

Because Russian whaling ships began to operate in the East Sea, in 1891 the Japanese “Fuso Industrial Company” obtained from the Korean dynasty a three-year license for whaling off the coast of South Gyeongsang Province. Soon after Japan had won the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese company took over the Russian whaling base in Jangsaengpo in 1905, and expanded several facilities in support of its long-term operation, including the cold meat factory, the ironworks, pier, butchering plant, and accommodation for employees. From 1906 to 1908, Japanese whaling companies hunted fin whales, gray whales and blue whales throughout the year. In 1908, the number of fin and gray whales caught exceeded 100. Near Ulsan, Japanese whalers hunted fin whales in autumn and spring, and gray whales in winter and spring. In 1910, Japanese whaling companies established whaling bases in Heuksan Island and Daecheong Island, in the West Sea, and these served as the main grounds for hunting fin whales from January to April. The meat and internal organs of gray whales were used for food and the rest was processed into oil and bone manure. Since the end of 1930’s, gray whales had been used for food, either salted or as canned meat.

Because the number of whales hunted dropped sharply, in 1942 the Korean Seafood Development Company began to hunt minke whales and dolphins. Minke whales were hunted primarily from Gangwon Province to Gyeongsang Province; whalers went north to Gangweon Province from spring to summer, and south from summer to autumn. Dolphin hunts were also carried out during the minke whaling period. Most parts of dolphins were used; the skin was used for leather, fat for machine, hardened and polymerized oils, meat and internal organs for food, bone for manure, and the rest for medicines (Park 1987: 308–322). Jangsaengpo in Ulsan became famous as a primary whaling center around the end of the 19th Century, and Japanese whaling ships employed many seamen and stokers from the village.

## **2.5 Whaling Activities and the Distribution of Whale Meat in Ulsan Jangsaengpo**

Koreans actively engaged in whaling for about 40 years, from the end of World War II to the commercial whaling ban in 1986. In 1946, the Korean Whaling Company was founded. More than 100 Koreans who had worked for Japanese whaling companies received two 50t wooden whaling ships in lieu of unpaid retirement money from the companies, and began whaling for themselves. Then villagers of Jangsaengpo who had worked as seamen or stokers on Japanese whaling ships started to work as deckhands, captains, or harpooners. The villagers engaging in whaling were divided into three generational groups. The first consisted of those who worked for Japanese whaling ships and had travelled to the Antarctic Ocean during the Japanese colonial period. The second group comprised those who had been on Japanese whaling ships from the 1950’s to hunt fin whales. The third generation group consisted of those who became whalers on iron



whaling ships after the 1970's, and had hunted minke whales until 1985.

Local teenagers were hired on Japanese whaling ships as stokers. Because no other jobs were available in the village, and the working conditions and pay of whaling ships were good, there were many local applicants for the jobs. Because whalers from Jangsaengpo had good eyesight, they even went as far as the Antarctic Ocean, Hokkaido and Sakhalin to secure whale oil needed as war materiel for Japan. As there were many fin whales in the 1950's, Korean whalers engaged in hunting large fin whales using small-sized ships. During the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, whale meat was an important protein source for refugees in Busan.

Jangsaengpo flourished as a whaling base from the 1970's until the mid-1980's. There were "... more than ten facilities related to whaling in the small port, such as shipyard, ironworks, ship chandlers, and whale processing factories, as well as 42 restaurants specializing in whale meat dishes that attracted more than 500 customers a day" (*Gyeonghyang Newspaper*: April 25, 1985). According to villagers, there was a joke in those days when whaling prospered that when a whaling ship anchored in the bay even a dog walked down the street with a ten thousand won bill in its mouth.

Until the 1960's, exports of whale meat were small compared to domestic consumption. For domestic consumption, peddlers procured whale meat and boiled internal organs in Jangsaengpo to sell either from a bicycle or at street stalls. It took plenty of time to bring a whale to a butchering factory, and even butchered meat was not refrigerated until it reached consumers.

In the 1970's, whales were exported and distributed in various ways. Japan came to depend heavily on imported whale meat from Korea, because of a sharp drop in Japan's quota of whales. The price of whale meat exported to Japan was 5–10 times higher than that sold domestically, so all the high-quality parts of which Japanese people were fond, namely "Une" (the wrinkled part from the neck to the chest) and red meat, were exported to Japan, whereas the remaining parts, such as blood, internal organs, and meat stuck to bones, were consumed at home. With the ban on commercial whaling in 1985, salted tails and skins, in addition to internal organs and bones, were exported to Japan. Whales hunted in the East Sea were brought to Jangsaengpo, where the whaling cooperative engaged in their consignment sale. On the other hand, when the export cooperative purchased a whole whale at an auction, some portions were removed first for export, and the rest was sold at home. If there were insufficient whales for export, all were put up for auction.

Whales were butchered either on a carrier or at a butchering factory, according to the number and the size of the whales. So auctions also took place either on the ship or at the factory. Successful brokers either sent the whale meat to their clients or preserved it in their refrigerator to later boil it and sell directly to peddlers and others. Although some brokers possessed their own facilities to boil a large quantity of meat, the owners of whaling ships often had the facilities as traders, and they sold boiled meat to wholesalers and peddlers. Brokers had to process whale meat before they sold it to wholesalers. The engaged woman workers boil and cut meat into shapes suitable for sale. These women had connections with certain brokers, and the profit from whale meat sold



**Figure 4** Whale meat for retail (left), boiled whale meat (right): whale meat as the product

to wholesalers and retailers was shared equally among the brokers, those in the same trade who invested in their business, and the woman workers who participated in processing the whale meat (Figure 4).

Whale meat was sold through three different routes. The first was that an entire whale was transferred to a retailer from outside the village, such as in Busan, who had ordered it beforehand for the contract price plus 10% in commission fees. This was because retailers did not have a license to bid at an auction, and so had to ask brokers to make a bid for them. The second channel was when brokers sold parts of a whale directly to retailers in Jangsaengpo. The retailers sold 80–90% of the whale meat and kept the rest frozen in a warehouse to sell later. This was a frequent practice. The last route was when brokers boiled whale meat several times as necessary, and sold it to woman peddlers. In the evening each peddler purchased for cash 20–30 chunks of meat attached to internal organs, bones, or skin, and the next morning sold it near the station or at a market in Ulsan. While large chunks of high-quality meat were sold to retailers in big cities like Busan and restaurants in Jangsaengpo, the remaining low-quality meat was peddled in and around the village. The export of whale meat to Japan increased to more than 50% of the total of hunted whales. Also, as whale meat came to be consumed not only in Busan and Ulsan, but also in Pohang and Daegu, the domestic market was secured. Whale meat was most consumed in Busan, where as much as an entire whale was eaten each day. The whale meat butchered in Jangsaengpo was packed into ice for delivery by truck to Busan, although it was difficult to keep it fresh in summer. Whale meat was still an important source of protein affordable to workers. Residents of Jangsaengpo, who are used to eating fresh whale meat, say that although they are the greatest consumers of whale meat, people in Busan do not know the true taste of the fresh meat.

After 1986, most of the meat of whales caught accidentally in fishing nets was consumed in domestic whale meat shops. However, the value increased because demand was greater than supply. In recent years it became realized again the whale meat is a high quality food, or health food, so the number of whale meat shops is increasing

nationwide.

Such a situation leads to illegal whaling. In order to prevent illegal whaling and undeclared distribution, the government proposed an amendment to “a notice concerning the preservation and management of the whale as a natural resource”. From October 2010, collecting samples was made obligatory, in order to establish a gene information database on the whales caught accidentally in fishing nets or hunted illegally. Without a “whale distribution certificate” issued by the head of a maritime police station, whale meat cannot be sold, bought, or distributed. According to the Whale Research Institute, currently only 70–80% of gene information of the whales caught accidentally in fishing nets or hunted illegally is obtained, and the police are unable to identify precisely whether or not whales have been caught legally. The whales accidentally caught in fishing nets are sold only at shops commissioned by a fishing industry cooperative. Also, they are butchered at a designated place. In addition, the Korean government has determined clear procedures for their distribution. The chief of a cooperative can sell whale meat by commission only when a “whale distribution certificate” has been issued or an inspection conducted. There is a correlation between the increasing number of whales caught by accident in fishing nets or stranded on beaches and the number of whale restaurants (*Busan Newspaper*: August 16, 2010).

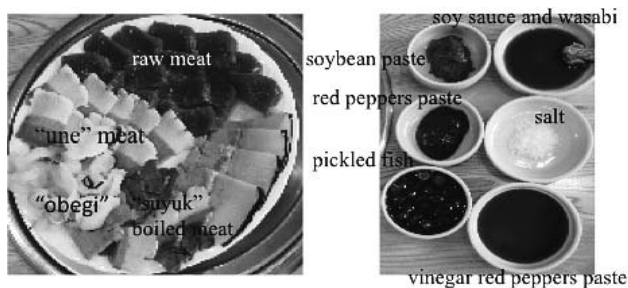
### 3. Whale Food Culture and the Identity of a Community

#### 3.1 How to Cook Particular Parts of Whale Meat

The properties of meat from the back, tail, and abdomen differ. Back meat is somewhat thicker than other parts, and the fat part of the skin also differs from that of the back or of the abdomen. Whereas fat in the abdomen is rather whitish and that of the back is black, the tail part is made up of muscles and contains a thinner layer of fat. Cooking methods of these parts are almost the same as those of beef and pork, and include eating raw, grilling, stewing, frying, and boiling.

##### 3.1.1 Eating the Meat Raw

“Une” is striped and uneven meat from the mandible to the abdomen of the Baleen Whale (Figure 5). This word originated from *mune*, meaning “chest” in Japanese. As most high quality parts were exported to Japan, nobody but harpooners could savor it. It was usually served raw. All “Une” that was cut into cubes was exported, and the rest sold domestically. The price was very high because it was seldom available on the domestic market. Koreans freeze the meat slightly, dip it in soy sauce with *wasabi* or red pepper paste, and then eat it. It is also good boiled, but, as only a limited amount of the part was available to them, the best way to enjoy the taste and flavor was to eat it raw. The amount of raw meat with little fat, such as that of the back and abdomen, differs according to the size of a whale. A minke whale yields 25–60kg of red meat. When the best quality meat with fine veins of fat was exported to Japan, its price was at least 20 times higher than at home. As red meat from Jangsaengpo was cheap and fresh, it was welcomed by consumers in Japan. Fresh red meat was served as “Yukke” (Figure 6), or



**Figure 5** Whale meats and sauces (raw meat, “une” meat (red pepper paste or soy sauce and wasabi), “suyuk” (pickled fish or salt), “obegi” (vinegar red pepper paste)



**Figure 6** Yukke (soybean paste or red pepper paste)

raw, or meat or eaten with red pepper paste.

“Onomi” is red meat from the root part of the tail and fin, which has fine veins of fat. It is ranked the highest among several parts of meat. The amount of the meat depends on the size of the whale; a minke whale has about 10kg of Onomi. Whale meat with fine veins of fat is considered so delicious and savory that even sirloin or tender red beef is regarded as inferior to it. It was said that as it was of the highest grade, only the Emperor was able to relish it. The meat is produced in too small a quantity to be on the market.

Like the meat of rays, Koreans ferment and eat the gum part of the baleen whales. However, because a minke whale is too small to yield much gum, they cut it into pieces and eat it raw. On the other hand, they enjoy eating the fermented or boiled gum part of larger species, such as blue whales. It is said that the raw heart of a whale tastes better than red meat. When many fin whales were hunted, the skin parts of the abdomen and chest were removed, cut into fine strips, and eaten raw. This is practiced only by Jangsaengpo villagers. When they obtain a whale, they also eat the raw skin part of the abdomen with vinegar mixed with either red pepper paste or *wasabi*, to bring out the taste and flavor.

### 3.1.2 Boiling

The parts of a whale other than fresh red meat, chest, tail meat, and gum are eaten boiled. These boiled parts are called “Suyuk” (mature meat). According to Mr. B, who runs a restaurant in Jangsaengpo specializing in whale dishes, all parts, including internal organs, skin, rib, tongue, lung, heart, and kidney, can be boiled to make mature meat (Figure 7). When making mature meat, these parts should not be separated from the skin, blood, or red meat, otherwise the value of mature meat may be lost. Eyeballs are simply boiled. Like beef, different whale meat parts differ in taste; it is said that there are 12 kinds of tastes among the parts. In Jangsaengpo, the liver of the minke whale is not eaten, because people believe that they will lose the skin on both their body and head if they do. But they eat dolphin liver. Mature meat is eaten with either pickled anchovies or



**Figure 7** Whale meat dishes: “suyuk” (left), “obegi” (center) and whale soup (right)

salt.

The way whale meat is boiled differs from one family to another, because each has its own taste preferences. For instance, some families use salt as it is, whereas others use the salt for seasoning whale meat, which was skimmed off many times for several months to years. To skim salt leads to remove the bitter taste from it. It is difficult to adjust the boiling time of meat because its properties differ among the various parts. Boiling times for whale meat depend on the age, size and fleshiness of the whale. When a large volume of meat is boiled, it is simmered it for long time. So when boiling whale meat, attention must be paid to the kind of the meat being cooked.

“Obegi” is salted tail and dorsal fin parts of a whale, which seem too hard for even a mouse to nibble (Figure 7). Formerly they were served on celebratory occasions and for funerals. However, because they are expensive and not readily available today, they have disappeared from such tables. Mr. S, a former harpooner, said “If the parts are salted, they will be edible even in a hundred years. When whaling flourished, a lot of minke whales were hunted. When we went to Eocheong Island to hunt minke whales, four or five bales of tails and dorsal fins were allocated to each seaman. So if I had salted and kept all of those tails and dorsal fins, I might have been very rich. Because of being salted, “Obegi” does not become rotten. Before eating, you slice and quickly boil it in hot water, then leave it in water in order to remove the saltiness. Then you can eat it with red pepper paste and vinegar. “Obegi” used to be so abundant and common that anyone was able to eat it. While you eat it, you gradually find the taste. Recently people enjoy “Obegi” cooked with vegetables and vinegar red pepper paste, garlic, etc. Jangsaengpo villagers used to eat boiled and cut skin parts from only the abdomen of fin whales. If you remove the skin of the abdomen from red meat, the meat was degraded. Thus, you had to be prepared for a loss in terms of business. When people could not catch fin whales, they stopped eating the parts.”

### 3.1.3 Frying

Today’s whale meat dishes include both traditional and recently created ones. Because fresh red meat contains enough fat, it tastes like beef ribs. Whale ribs are either fried

with *kimchi* in a pan or grilled with salt. But if the meat is of good quality, only a few people eat it grilled. Fried whale meat mixed with various vegetables is just like fried pork or beef.

#### 3.1.4 Stewing

Because most quality meat was exported to Japan, Jangsaengpo villagers would eat the remaining lower-quality meat, to which water and seasonings were added so that the quantity was increased, just like whale soup (Figure 7). It is cooked like beef soup, but whale soup contains less water and more ingredients than beef soup. When whaling was actively engaged in, the most popular whale meat dish among Jangsaengpo villagers was whale soup. It comprised 90% of all whale meat dishes. Because it is heavily seasoned, it requires no side dishes; people simply add rice to whale soup, and eat it. Usually it is cooked and kept in a stewpot, to be eaten whenever desired. When the softest portion of red meat and the skin is put in whale soup and stewed, the result is a delicious broth blended with fat. The dry radish leaves and soybean sprouts and radish are added.

#### 3.1.5 Grilling

Grilled whale meat means a dish of ribs grilled with the same seasonings as are added to grilled beef. Only ribs are used in this dish, which is expensive because the amount of ribs from a whale is limited.

Another way of cooking the meat involves removing the fat from the skin. The skin is eaten as a “whale snack”. After cutting the skin into 10–15cm pieces, the surface is scored 1cm apart to remove the fat. It is then boiled in a pot so that the fat floats to the surface and can be scooped up. What remains is “whale snacks” that are crisp, just like those made from roasted rice. It is said that nobody can imagine the flavor without tasting it.

### 3.2 Gap in Recognition of Whale Food Culture

Along the southeast and southwest coasts of the Korean Peninsula, where whale butchering factories or whaling companies existed formerly, people like to eat whale meat. However, whale meat is not necessarily popular throughout the country, and its acceptance varies according to location and people’s age. Because some fishermen believe that consuming whale meat brings bad luck, they refrain from eating it. During those days when people of Jangsaengpo engaged in whaling, whale meat was the most accessible food. Most villagers hardly ate raw fish, though it was a fishing village, and at the same time they could not afford to buy beef or pork. Even those villagers who had nothing to do with whaling could obtain some whale meat, because whaling companies gave some to its employees, who always shared it with their neighbors and relatives in the village. Thus when a whale was hunted, villagers were able to eat whale meat without buying it. Because people were poor in those days, the whale meat was very important as food for almost all households, except a few rich families. They mostly stewed it and ate it as mature meat. When they ate raw red meat, they seasoned it with fermented soybean paste with pepper. On celebratory occasions, like a wedding, whale

meat soup and “Obegi” were always served. Children chewed whale meat as if it were chewing gum, and when abundant it was given to dogs.

Because Jangsaengpo was a whaling base, villagers could always eat fresh whale meat. In contrast, it was difficult for people not from the village to eat it fresh before refrigeration became available. For example, in Busan and Pohang, which were far from Jangsaengpo, they think that the old-fashioned taste is the most delicious. Thus visitors to Jangsaengpo from other areas who eat whale meat often suspect that the meat might have been treated with chemicals, because it did not give off a smell peculiar to excessively-matured meat. On the other hand, Jangsaengpo villagers are proud that they are the only people who know the taste of really fresh and high quality whale meat.

Those who became harpooners after World War II believe that whale meat is very safe to consume because it is free of bacteria. And if it carries bacteria, they aver it would have been contaminated through the processes of distribution, preservation, or food preparation. They have never suffered any ill effects from eating whale meat. They say that “whale meat is more expensive than beef, but free of parasites. Beef is not comparable to whale meat in terms of nutrition and safety, so we don’t think the whale meat is too expensive.” However, whale meat contains no parasites and is delicious. Because a whale’s temperature is higher than that of humans, at around 40 degrees, whales possess germicidal properties. Therefore, in consuming whale meat one does not have to worry about parasites.

During Japanese colonial times, eating whale meat instead of beef was encouraged, and people were told that there was no risk of whale meat being contaminated with parasites. People were taught how to make sashimi from whale meat; “Beef and fish can be eaten raw, but are sometimes contaminated with parasites. Thus, they are unsafe. Fresh whale meat should cut into pieces of 3–4cm. After soaking in hot water briefly, the pieces should be put into cold water with ice to make them cool. Then, they should be drained and served raw as sashimi, but people should not forget to sprinkle plenty of pepper“ (*Chosun Newspaper* December 28, 1937).

Jangsaengpo villagers say that people in Ulsan who have kept on eating whale meat will continue to eat it regularly, regardless of cost. When they engaged in whaling in the West Sea, they had to carry the whales caught all the way to Ulsan. Thus, a chief in charge of butchering a whale was aboard the whaling ship in order to butcher and refrigerate whales soon after they had been killed. It is said that if you cook such meat from the whales, you can find and savor different tastes of 12 kinds of whale meat. A person said, “the best tasting dish on the ship is that of whale meat grilled on an iron plate on a stove after being soaked in soy sauce with pepper and mashed garlic. Cooked whale meat gives off peculiar smell, like something rotten, to a person who eats it for the first time, so it is not easy for him or her to put it into the mouth. When you get used to it, you cannot stop seeking for the taste of the whale meat, even if nobody recommends it. Such is the taste of whale meat.” The person continued, saying, “When reporters visited me to cover whale meat, I seasoned whale meat with soy sauce and grilled it on a stove, then I offered it to them. But as they hated the peculiar smell of the meat, they did not attempt to eat it. But one of them might have tried it the next day, so several days

later all of them came wanting to eat it.”

Generally it is thought that not many people are willing to eat whale meat, because it costs more than beef. However, people who have tasted whale meat are willing to buy, no matter how much it costs. The taste of whale meat is so fine to them that they do not hesitate to spare money for it. The reason why whale meat is often compared with beef is that high quality whale meat tastes as delicious as sirloin. Because whale meat is marbled with fine veins of fat, like beef, there was a rumor that beef stores sold whale meat as beef to unsuspecting customers. With their good knowledge of whale meat, Jangsaengpo villagers can distinguish whale meat from beef. In those days when whaling took place, they would eat such fresh whale meat that would “melt in the mouth”, and they say that whale meat dishes at that time were far more delicious than those of today. Mr. S says, “I brought red whale meat from my parents’ home to my dormitory in Seoul, and treated more than ten friends with it. I cooked it the same way as beef soup. They believed that it was beef soup. It was not easy for me to persuade them that it was whale soup.” In Jangsaengpo they cannot stop talking about how delicious fresh and high quality whale meat was. Today, however, since only whales caught accidentally in fishing nets are allowed to be consumed, freshness and quality have inevitably declined.

#### **4. Regional Identity against Western-centric**

Many villagers still dream of the days when whaling prospered in Jangsaengpo. If whales return to Jangsaengpo together with whaling businesses, they believe that those good old days may return. Mr. J, a former captain of a whaling ship, says, “When we had several whaling ships in Jangsaengpo, our village was wealthy and always bright with lights. When we visited Ulsan, people in the city envied us when they learned that we were from Jangsaengpo. Jangsaengpo flourished so much that it was said that those who drank at big wine bars late into night were all from Jangsaengpo.” Their memories of the past sustain their pride in their village. When the whaling businesses ran well its population was greater, and since many villagers engaged in whaling the village was wealthy. But after the ban on the commercial whaling, most people moved out to Ulsan. Although the remaining villagers have suffered from the economic recession, they believe they will recover the prosperity of the past. Thus, the villagers firmly expect to resume the whaling business. Because the number of whales seen near the coast has increased rapidly since the whaling ban, several Jangsaengpo villagers insist on the resumption of whaling. Once they restart the whaling, they think that whale meat should be made available to them at lower cost. Mr. C, a broker, said: “Because whaling is not taking place now, whale meat is very expensive. Even people who want to eat the meat cannot do so. In particular, the number of minke whales has increased greatly. While we hunted fin whales, we have not hunted many minke whales for the past 60 years. As we stopped whaling in 1985, there must have been a greater number of minke whales. Once whaling is resumed, those who eat whale meat now will be able to eat it more.”

On the other hand, several villagers doubt that whaling will lead to a revival of prosperity for Jangsaengpo. However, even if whaling resumes the villagers worry about



the present situation in which none of the younger generation has experienced whaling. Whaling starts with making a search for a whale. Thus, those who have good eyesight can become seamen on a whaling ship. Because 26 years have passed since whaling stopped there is nobody living in Jangsaengpo now who has the ability to find a whale. Even if whaling resumes, there is a suspicion that there may not be enough market demand for whale meat. Mr. Y, former captain of a whaling ship, says: "Beef is eaten everywhere in the country, whereas whale meat is consumed only in limited areas, so the market of whale meat is small. While whaling took place, Busan was the main place for consuming whale meat, but such a market has already shrunk. Without Japan as the partner to which whale meat can be exported, it may be difficult for Korean whalers to secure a market. If whale meat is not consumed, it may be hard for them to own a whaling ship and to distribute whale meat to other local people". Mr. P, a former harpooner, points out that: "In the past when we exported whale meat to Japan, we kept the price of the meat high and thus, secured a high income. If we restart the whaling only with the domestic market as the single sale target, it is not certain that the whaling would produce any profit."

In today's Jangsaengpo, there are more restaurants and shops selling whale meat than when whaling was actively engaged in. Brokers from Jangsaengpo sell almost all whales accidentally caught in the West Sea by commission. Although Jangsaengpo is famous throughout the country as the production and consumption center of whale meat, it does not share information with other areas concerning the expansion of sales and consumption. Moreover, without exchanges of opinions among the villagers themselves, they would encounter only serious confrontation between pro-whaling and anti-whaling groups.

Whales are surely living things that swim in the vast ocean, but also they are cultural symbol that enrich cultures. In the future, the history and culture concerning whales should be reviewed and shared among all the villagers. Mr. H, a native of Jangsaengpo, is very fond of whale meat and even now eats it once a month. But he is against whaling. He thinks that if a whale festival is resumed, Jangsaengpo may become active again, which, however, might be nothing but a temporary phenomenon. Thus, he argues that what is more important is not the issue of resumption of whaling, but conserving culture related to the whale. Jangsaengpo and Ulsan have been centers where culture related to the whale has existed since ancient times. Whale cultures are connected with economic revitalization and local identity. What should be considered now is how all the people in the area create and share their culture related to the whale, and how such efforts eventually make their life more affluent. In order to recover the vitality of Jangsaengpo, which was lost owing to the whaling moratorium, priority should be given to efforts to revive the identity of the local community through cultural revitalization over those to resume whaling. It requires restructuring of a future as opposed to the simple recovery of the number of the whaling that has disappeared, and also recovery from the situation of a socially disintegrated hometown. If efforts in this direction bear fruit, the historical and cultural identity of Jangsaengpo will become attractive among future generations, who would continue restructuring the history of whales in

Jangsaengpo in a more meaningful way. What is most significant is that such “whale culture” should be pursued by young people who can have with a feeling for it and who are willing to develop and share it. If whale food culture is not shared by the young, especially teenagers and those in the twenties, it would be a dead culture.

## 5. Conclusion

As has been described in this paper, Korea’s whale food culture, centering in the Ulsan area, is based on historical factors, and today it is regarded as a source of the local identity to integrate people and their cultural resource. After the ban on whaling, local people confronted a situation where the whale food culture supporting their identity has faded owing to the influences of the Western-centric ideas that view culture only in the context of “barbarism versus civilization”. While sustaining whale food culture by using whales accidentally caught in fishing nets, they are eagerly pursuing effective measures to overcome the period of “gore = whale” that is taking place again. Under such circumstances, what whale food culture they should create is a problem for future study.

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