



From top, clockwise: Xingkai, a Chinese restaurant in the Finance Center that opened in 2001, was architect Min Kyung-sik's first foray in restaurant consulting. One of his major projects is the comprehensive design and planning of Vision City (1994) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In Korea, Mr. Min pursued smaller projects, including a noodle bar, Homyeondang (2002), and an artist's studio (2002).

By Inès Cho  
Staff Writer

In Korea's fiercely competitive food and dining industry, even the most flamboyant, trend-setting restaurants and cafes can come and go like passing traffic.

According to Shin Bong-kyu, president of the Korea Foodservice Institute, an 11-year-old firm specializing in analysis of the Korean dining industry, more than 70 percent of 650,000 listed restaurants in the country end up closing within a year from the date of opening. More than 90 percent close after two years.

"Most people think opening a restaurant is easier than other businesses. They think only good food or interior can make the business work, but that's not true at all," said Mr. Shin.

Exactly how tough is the industry?  
"If you consider the statistics that there are more than 67 restaurants for each person in South Korea, then you can figure out how hard it is for a restaurant owner to keep his customers satisfied," he said.

Yet some restaurateurs manage to defy the odds. Min Kyung-sik, an architect who has designed and opened some of the trendiest restaurants in Seoul, said more than 90 percent of his restaurants are still thriving.

He contends that in Korea's fiercely competitive restaurant scene these days, success can be found almost right away. "If a restaurant makes a profit within three months and maintains maximum sales for another three months, it promises good business," he said.

Mr. Min made a name for himself in Korea's restaurant consulting industry in 2001, when he designed three floors and four restaurants in the basement of the Seoul Finance Center. Xingkai, an upscale Chinese restaurant, and Moomba, a sleek bar with a Chinese theme, were seen by many as a departure from downtown's dowdy dining scene.

Other restaurants he's designed include Park Lounge, which offers Thai and Chinese cuisine, and Homyeondang, a noodle joint, both in the heart of Cheongdam-dong. In the new Seoul Station, Mr. Min designed a Chinese restaurant, T-Won, with an interior that is reminiscent of Shanghai in the 1930s.

As chic as his restaurants are, he isn't afraid of bucking trends. In Apgujeong-dong, where restaurant menu prices are easily double or triple those in other parts of the city, he designed an elaborately decorated Korean restaurant, Sawore Boribap ("Barley in April"), that featured four-dollar meals per person.

His last concept restaurant, Soonaebo, in Cheongdam-dong, featured traditional Korean blood sausage matched with inexpensive wine. The restaurant recently closed, however, because of the owner's personal and legal troubles.

These days, whether he is in Seoul, Tokyo or Beijing, Mr. Min's mobile phone never ceases to ring; his calendar is packed with meetings with big clients.

In the past year or so, his focus has been on China, where he visits every two weeks.

"Have you been to Xiantindi?" he asked, as if the trendy sector of Shanghai were just a block away from a Cheongdam-dong restaurant he had just finished decorating. "When I went to an opening party of a restaurant there, I was so shocked. The crowd was extremely chic; I thought I was in New York."

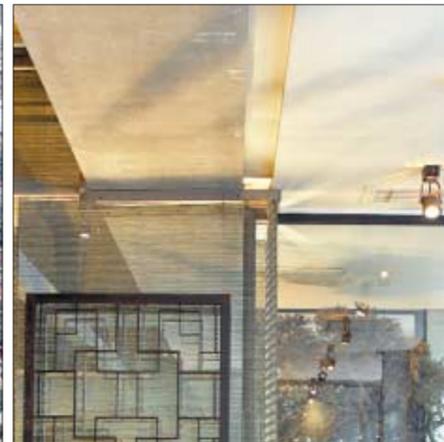
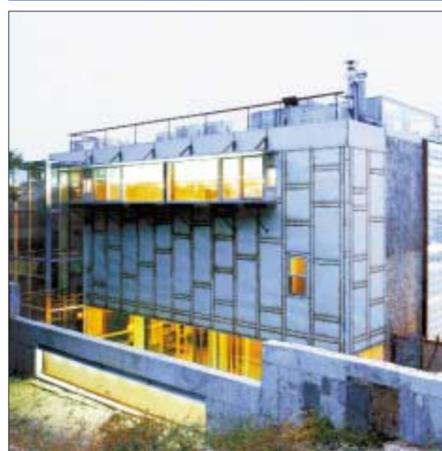
His new company, Ming Zahn Tongyong, based in Shanghai and open for business in March, was named after the three partners, each representing Korea, Japan and China.

"Chinese people don't like it when a Japanese person comes forward in business dealings," Mr. Min said. "To take advantage of Japanese high-tech and information and to use local construction and material supplies, I, as Korean, act as a mediator who coordinates and expands business deals in all three countries."

"I feel very lucky. I feel like an invisible hand is helping me. Can you believe — as I was setting up a company in Shanghai in March, I was already getting offers," he



## Architect displays his taste in fine dining



The headquarters of the 55-story Citicorp building in New York City, bottom, and inexpensive, traditional Korean restaurants in southern Seoul demonstrate the scope of the projects taken on by the Korean architect Min Kyung-sik.  
By Inès Cho



said.

One of the major deals included setting up 1,000 Korean pizza chains across China by the year 2008.

To Mr. Min, his adventure in the new land has just begun. "Whether Koreans like it or not, China will be the leading culture in Asia in the future."

### Musical background

Mr. Min owes his adventurous streak to his father, who had taken him hunting and fishing on weekends. A native of Gaeseong, the ancient capital in North Korea, his father had taught his young son the finer tastes enjoyed by privileged families in Korea, taking him to local fish markets and cooking the best of the catch.

Born and raised in Seoul, the younger Mr. Min taught himself how to play guitar and drums and loved singing with his friends. While attending Seoul High School, he formed an underground band and played in concerts.

Not wanting to disappoint his aging father, Mr. Min decided to enter Seoul National University, but in order to make it into the top university, he had to choose the least competitive field of study, agricultural science.

In college, his passion for music didn't stop; he soon formed a singing group of three and entered a national singing contest for university students.

"It was the 1970s, the age of blue jeans and acoustic guitars. At least one person in my gang carried a guitar, and wherever and whenever we had a chance, we sang together," he said.

His band won third prize, and overnight Mr. Min and his two friends became stars on national television. The song, "Jeolmeun Yeonindeul" ("Young Lovers"), hit the top of the pop charts and has remained a classic.

But his burgeoning musical career took another turn. "We gave concerts and toured around the country for one and a half years. Our parents, of course, opposed it. One day, the three of us got together and decided we'd break up the group, no singing, period, from now on, and go back to where we were before and study again," he said.

In his junior year, Mr. Min chose to focus on landscape architecture, "the most unrelated" of all within the school of agriculture.

Upon graduation, he wanted to be an architect. So he got a job at Gonggan ("Space"), a well-known architecture firm in Korea. Its building near Daehangno, in northern Seoul, was equipped with a small theater and published art books on the side, an ideal environment for the aspiring architect.

But the conformist values and formality in architecture at the time was suffocating. "A window had to be square all the time, and that kind of way of thinking stifled me. I wanted to get away from it all and explore the new world out there," he said.

When his boss, Kim Swoo-geun, one of the leading

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architects at the time, asked Mr. Min to work in Gonggan's New York office in 1984, he jumped at the chance.

"My seven-year stay in New York City changed my life for good," he said. "[It] meant exploring infinite opportunities, forms, rules in architecture, creativity, life. That liberated me completely."

The New York office dealt in procuring American high-tech materials, such as the suspension canvas to cover the dome at the then-new Olympic Stadium in Seoul, and allowed him to work as the chief designer for world-class projects, such as the headquarters of Citicorp in New York City.

Another grand project, which embraced comprehensive designs — urban, landscape and architecture and interior — was to design the Vision City Project in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, which is still under construction.

### Growth in Asia

Even from the United States, he was able to spot the potential of Asia as the countries there began prospering in the early 1990s.

"Right after the Olympics in Korea, I saw the coming of Asia and had an urge to go to Asia again," Mr. Min said.

After returning to Korea in 1991, he set up his own company six years later in southern Seoul, but the scope of his business went from macro to micro. From Vision City, a \$250 million deal, Mr. Min took on much smaller projects. His new focus became narrower as well. Instead of skyscrapers, he built art studios, and then planned out restaurants, down to the matching tableware.

In his first foray into restaurant consulting, when he was designing the first restaurant space in the Seoul Finance Center in 2001, he wanted to make sure the place reflected the trend at the time: retro, vintage and romantic.

"Restaurant design is about delicate refinement and personal dedication because food brings such an immediate effect in people. And my expertise in architecture could reflect the trends at the time," he said.

One of his latest ideas, reflecting the recent emphasis on healthful living, is to introduce flavored tofu in Korea.

"There are only two kinds of tofu, you know, soft and hard, available in Korean market," he said. "My partner in Japan introduced me to Masamichi Kawashima, a third-generation tofu master based in Kyushu. I had given him various Korean spices, and he created quite a range of flavored tofu. Some tofus are fermented like cheese, to be eaten with wine, and there will be spicy tofu as well."

As for the future, Mr. Min sees restaurant trends leaning toward a more holistic approach.

"Restaurants, fashion, all spaces will reflect the overall lifestyle of contemporary people, who are not only health-conscious but also aware of good values, family and well-being," he said.

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