

EASTERN GASTRODIPLOMATIC EFFORTS: ASIAN NATIONS AS PIONEERS IN THE USE OF CUISINE IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Tanja Strugar grew up living in various countries around the world. China, Lebanon, Israel, Italy, South Africa, Serbia and the United States have all been her home, so her interest in cultural similarities and differences came naturally. She completed an undergraduate degree in Communications, with a minor in marketing, at the American University of Rome, after which she completed the Master of Arts UNESCO Chair Program in Cultural Policy and Management at the University of Arts in Belgrade, where she wrote her master thesis on "Gastronomy as a Tool in Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding in Serbia". Her areas of expertise are gastronomy in diplomacy and culture. She currently resides in Serbia.

A culture is comprised of narratives that perpetuate certain values and morals, and then channels them through media such as visual art, music and theatre. This transmission can also be conducted through food and foodways, carrying these values through the process of sharing experiences and customs revolving around a meal. From nostalgia to lessons on life, the preparation and sharing of food has been essential in the education of young generations in understanding a certain way of life. Today, this 'word-of-bite' has only survived in cultures that have solidified and protected their values through the development and solidification of their national gastronomy, whether through UNESCO labelling as cultural heritage or through becoming a widely recognized part of the tourist offer.

Sociologists and anthropologists recognized this and began analysing the origins of dishes, their etymology, symbolism within the society (cultural and/or religious), as well as similarities and differences between dishes of various cultures. This metaphysical value can be projected to larger scales than individual sentiments; if enough people give the same dish or food that value it becomes a societal tool for bringing people together. This means that these dishes are capable of uniting a nation's population if enough importance is placed on them at a metaphysical level. Hend Alhinnawi explains this perfectly in his blog:

"Food is a catalyst, not only for families to come together, but sharing a meal often creates an environment for business partners, co-workers, community leaders, and educators to exchange ideas for a purpose far greater than basic nutrition. It is an important tool in building cultural understanding, and in turn, breaking down traditional barriers by providing insight into a culture that might otherwise be unknown to a person"

(Alhinnawi, 2011)

Governments have recognized this value and began developing and incorporating outreach programs into their procedures, classified as gastrodipomatic efforts, placing food as a priority in not only promoting a

sense of national identity, but also stimulating exchange between cultures as to what they have to offer (of which food is the hardest to decline).

Paul Rockower first coined the term gastrodiploamacy, romantically defining it as “a method of reaching hearts and minds through people’s stomachs” (Wallin, 2013). Later Sam Chapple-Sokol gave a more precise definition: “The use of food and cuisine as an instrument to create a cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation” (Chapple-Sokol, 2012). The term gastrodiploamacy has come into existence in the last decade and has been utilized by a variety of countries as a soft-power instrument for boosting their public image.

Countries have made their gastrodiploamatic efforts go across borders, in the hopes of promoting cultural exchange and a rise in global awareness. Most of these nations reside in Asia, where the concept of gastrodiploamacy was first recognised. These include nations that have boosted their international recognition through the spreading of restaurants throughout the globe, such as China, Japan, and India. These examples have had indirect diplomatic results, as the government did not fund the establishment of the restaurants, but other nations’ governments did take direct action within the field.

One of the pioneering countries in the incorporation of gastrodiploamacy is Thailand, which launched the initiative ‘Global Thai’ in 2002 through opening Thai restaurants around the globe. According to their government reports, the numbers went from 5,500 in 2002 to 10,000 in 2013, implying that their initiative is successful. Many agreed that this method was an effective point of action for building a public image; diplomats in Washington have “point[ed] out that restaurants are often the only contact that most Americans have with foreign cultures” (“Thailand’s gastro-diplomacy”, 2002). Others have taken their own initiatives to promote Thai culture, such as Thai senator in 2002 Mechai Viravaidya, who owns several restaurants worldwide titled “Cabbages and Condoms”, which promotes birth control and assist in the fight against the spreading of AIDS. These efforts can be interpreted as successful, considering the overall increase in Thailand’s popularity as a tourist and migration destination: in data made available by the Department of Tourism of Thailand, the country has experienced a growth of 107% in arrivals from all countries between 2002 and 2012 (Vanhaleweyk). The incorporation of Thai restaurants into daily life in other nations can also be seen as a positive result for the national brand of Thailand, and with the increase in the visibility of Thai culture one can conclude that Thailand’s ‘net worth’ on a global plain has increased in the last decade.

Another nation that is promoting their public image through food is Taiwan. According to an article in The Guardian “President Ma Ying-jeou has ordered his envoys to start talking the language of food by launching a £20m ‘gastro-diplomacy’ campaign in the UK and elsewhere” (Booth, 2010). Revealed in 2010, ‘Dim Sum Diplomacy’ planned to promote Taiwanese food as an alternative to Asian cuisine as seen abroad, specifically a healthier, lighter substitute to the typically heavy national cuisines that are readily available in many metropolises. The government intended to open 3,500 restaurants within Taiwan as well as internationally, play host to a variety of popular culinary events, as well as establish a “Taiwanese food foundation – a culinary think tank that will assist coffee shops and restaurant chains that promote Taiwanese foods abroad” (Rockower, 2010). Other goals included 10,000 jobs created by the end of 2013 and an additional 50 international brands.

Indirectly, the Taiwanese movie industry has also assisted in the expression of national identity through food. A variety of films produced in the last two decades have used food as a medium through which traditional and modern values have been expressed and translated to the audience. An example of this is the comedy film “Zone Pro Site: The Moveable Feast,” which centres on a young girl who lives on fast food and who enters a cooking competition for catering (Hsu, 2013). This is reflective of Taiwanese culinary traditions, as many poorer families would use catering companies to replace the restaurant experience for special occasions, and serve food outdoors. This is referred to as “ban doh”, and the director of the film used this as a medium to communicate to both younger and older generations, bringing back a form of cultural heritage while making the audience laugh.

Another example is the film “Eat Drink Man Woman,” which uses food as a medium for communication between family members, and simultaneously mirrors Taiwanese traditions and values. The plot is centred on a family of a widower Chinese master chef and his three daughters, who gather every Sunday in order to share a meal together, but end up dealing with the daughters' personal problems. This is a perfect example of the use of gastronomy to transfer values to an audience, specifically Confucianism in the context of familial life (Khaw, 2012). In the case of this movie it is the acceptance of modern values that reflect natural desires (i.e. sexual desires of the daughters) by the traditional values that are based on Confucian beliefs (the father feeling as though his opinion has become obsolete).

These two films act as representatives of a movement that utilized food in order to express and transfer Taiwanese values and culture to general audiences, as opposed to exclusively for Taiwanese audiences. This can be viewed as an informal form of culinary diplomacy, as it opens the door to understanding the culture of a nation and offers the opportunity to better communicate ideals and values.

South Korea is yet another country taking the gastrodiploamacy world by storm, referred to as ‘Kimchi Diplomacy’. In 2009 the South Korean first lady Lee Myung-bak prepared a variety of traditional dishes for American veterans of the Korean War that took place in the 1950's (Moskin, 2009). Her goal was to introduce an alternative view of South Korea to people that didn't experience it in the best light: “I wanted to give them a new taste of Korea as something positive and delicious,” she said in an interview (speaking through an interpreter), her first with a member of the Western news media since her husband took office the year before. “From the war, they do not have many pleasant food memories” (Moskin, 2009). The first lady also proceeded to have similar affairs with the Japanese prime minister and his wife, Miyuki Hatoyama, where Mrs Hatoyama proceeded to help prepare kimchi, stating that she “wanted to experience making kimchi with bare hands” (“Kimchi Diplomacy”, 2009). The utilization of food in order to change a country's image, no matter how small of an audience is being addressed, can result in mass turning of opinion through example. In addition to this initiative the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries set aside ten million dollars “to spend in 2009, including grants and scholarships for South Koreans to travel and attend culinary school” (Moskin, 2009). The South Korean government was confident of its being next in line to open restaurants abroad and bring foods such as tteokbokki, bibimbap and bulgogi to the international culinary world. They're initiatives instigated the ‘Hallyu’ (“the Korean Wave”) in the United States, increasing their cuisine's popularity and overall awareness in Americans as to all that South Korea has to offer. Whether through addressing the wider population, or simply through social interaction with other political figures, the South Korean First Lady managed to adapt a social aspect of her culture in order to open dialogue between nations and solidify relations, proving the real value of gastronomy in the political and social spheres.

Another nation that has developed an international gastronomic reputation is India, also known as 'Samosa Diplomacy'. Indian food especially can be found at almost every corner in London, and there is a tendency for there to be at least one Indian restaurant in every capital of the West. Restaurants aren't the only way Indian food has acted as representative of one of the largest countries in the world: in Australia the Uniting Church has played host to a monthly dinner for Indian students, where they can express their stress and fear concerning street violence targeting them. Indian food is served, in order to assist in the comforting of the students (Yudhvir, 2011).

Locally, efforts made by the government have been insufficient, but there have existed initiatives oriented towards promotion through gastronomy. Paul Rockower discusses an event conducted through government initiative: "In Delhi, the Indian Ministry of Tourism -- in collaboration with a variety of other ministries and tourist boards, helps host the popular tourist destination Dilli Haat, a rural market-style center to showcase Indian crafts and cuisine from all across India's varied 28 states" (Rockower, 2011).

There is great potential for India to further enhance its already established gastronomic reputation and promote the great cultural variety that all its states has to offer, which leaves us anticipating where the government will take the country in the future.

In the case of each nation, the cultural narrative acted as a cohesive social force, uniting neighbourhoods, villages, regions, and the nation, offering a sense of belonging and pride. The private, public and civil sectors have the capability to resurrect the positive narrative through a systematic approach to national gastronomy. As a relatively new discipline, gastrodiploamacy has already proven itself effective as a soft power instrument of public diplomacy. Its importance is highlighted by the general trend of globalisation, where it is becoming more difficult, especially for smaller countries, to showcase their national identity. It has the potential to reshape public diplomacy through its promotion of gastronomic exchange between nations, as well as its strengthening of cultures through accentuating a sense of pride for nationals. The number of ways in which a nation can utilize gastrodiploamacy is endless, which ultimately it leaves us to wonder what the 'foodies' of the world have in store for us in the future.

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