

Culinary Diplomacy in Diaspora Communities: Harnessing Soft Power through Food

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Abstract-Culinary diplomacy refers to the strategic deployment of food, cuisine, and culinary practices to advance cultural understanding, foster international relationships, and project soft power. Within the framework of soft power theory, where influence is generated through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. Diaspora communities play a distinctive role as cultural transmitters of gastronomic identity. This paper examines the mechanisms by which diaspora driven culinary practices operate as tools of soft power, situating them within cultural diplomacy and international relations scholarship. Through an interdisciplinary review of recent literature on gastrodiplomacy, nation branding, and diaspora culinary networks, this study argues that diaspora cuisine extends beyond economic consumption to become a dynamic form of everyday diplomacy with measurable impacts on host-country cultural perception and transnational soft power projection.

Index terms- Culinary, Diaspora, Diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy, soft power

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, describes a country's ability to influence others through culture, values, and positive image rather than coercion.¹ India, for example, can leverage its large diaspora including the global culinary diaspora that spreads Indian food, traditions, and culture as a powerful soft power tool.² Historically, the Girmitiyas, descendants of Indian indentured laborers have contributed significantly to India's soft power. Spread across the Caribbean, Mauritius, Africa, Fiji, and Malaysia, they have risen to influential positions in society, engaging in philanthropy, cultural preservation, business, and development initiatives. As custodians of Indian culture abroad, Girmitiya

communities help sustain and promote India's cultural identity globally.³

States utilize multiple sources of soft power, including cinema, education, media, and cuisine, to influence global audiences. Increasingly, diaspora communities are recognized as critical instruments of soft power because cultural elements, such as culinary traditions, naturally facilitate cross-border engagement.⁴ Middle-power countries often invest in international promotion of their cuisine to enhance visibility, strengthen nation branding, and engage in people-to-people diplomacy.⁵

II. CULINARY DIPLOMACY IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

In the contemporary era, cultural exports, media, education, and food have emerged as essential instruments of soft power. Culinary diplomacy or gastrodiplomacy is a subset of cultural diplomacy that leverages the universal appeal of food to bridge cultural and political divides. Practices range from state-sponsored food festivals to grassroots culinary events, fostering mutual understanding through shared gastronomic experiences.⁶

For instance, Indian cuisine has also become a major soft power asset, with dishes such as samosa, chaat, chicken tikka masala, masala dosa, and various curries spreading globally. Indian restaurants, including those operated by non-Indian South Asians, promote Indian culinary culture, contributing to the country's global image and cultural influence.⁷ Diaspora populations occupy liminal cultural spaces, maintaining connections to their homelands while participating in host societies. Through restaurants, festivals, and media, diaspora communities facilitate cross-cultural

exchange, introducing host communities to foreign foodways and, by extension, foreign cultures.

Indonesia's "Spice Up the World" initiative, launched in 2021 by Joko Widodo, promotes Indonesian spices and cuisine globally to enhance the national economy, boost exports, expand diaspora restaurants, and attract tourists. The government applies the Triangle Concept of Indonesian Gastronomy to highlight the cultural, historical, and narrative significance of Indonesian food. Challenges include storytelling capacity, funding, quality control, diaspora engagement, and sustainability.⁸ Diaspora culinary networks often develop organically, fostering emotional bonds even without formal institutional support. For example, Indonesian diaspora communities use food to connect global consumers with Indonesian culture, acting as grassroots cultural diplomats.⁹ Shared meals, culinary storytelling, and community events create "everyday diplomacy," generating cultural influence beyond formal state channels.

The "Global Thai" Program, a pioneering initiative that turned the nation's cuisine into a powerful diplomatic and economic tool. By standardizing recipes and providing professional training for chefs, the government ensured that "authentic" Thai flavors would be consistent across the globe. To expand this culinary footprint, the state offered financial assistance and streamlined loans to entrepreneurs looking to open Thai restaurants in foreign cities. This strategy successfully elevated Thai dishes like Pad Thai and Green Curry to global stardom, making them household names from London to New York. Beyond just food, the program functioned as a form of "Gastro-diplomacy," strengthening Thailand's cultural influence and building a prestigious national brand. This global exposure created a "pull factor" for tourism, as people who enjoyed the food abroad were inspired to visit the country of its origin.¹⁰

The South Korean Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs launched a strategic initiative known as "Kimchi Diplomacy" to elevate Korean cuisine (*Hansik*) to a global standard. Central to this effort is the promotion of Kimchi, not just as a side dish, but as a symbol of Korean health and heritage.¹¹ The government actively funds international Kimchi

festivals, sponsors high-end cooking classes for foreign chefs, and provides marketing support to Korean restaurants operating overseas. This culinary push was perfectly timed to ride the coattails of the global obsession with K-pop and K-dramas, where food often plays a starring role in the storytelling.¹² As a result, dishes like Bibimbap and Kimchi have become mainstream health icons, significantly strengthening South Korea's soft power. This "gastrodiplomacy" has transformed the nation's cultural presence, turning a fermented cabbage dish into a sophisticated tool for national branding and economic expansion.¹³

Through the global network of Confucius Institutes and high-profile cultural festivals, China has strategically utilized its diverse culinary traditions as a primary tool for international outreach.¹⁴ During Chinese New Year celebrations, traditional foods like dumplings and fish are showcased not merely as meals, but as symbolic representations of prosperity and heritage, serving as an accessible entry point for foreign audiences.¹⁵ To deepen this engagement, these institutes organize hands-on cooking workshops and elaborate cultural exhibitions that move beyond the "takeout" stereotype, educating the public on the regional philosophies and techniques behind authentic Chinese cooking. This systematic promotion turns food into a powerful cultural gateway, fostering a positive national image and creating a foundation for broader social, political, and linguistic engagement. As a result, the global appreciation for Chinese cuisine has evolved into a sophisticated form of soft power, allowing China to build "people-to-people" bridges that transcend traditional political boundaries.

In the age of globalization, food is more than nourishment, it is a diplomatic tool. As cultural boundaries blur, nations increasingly utilize their culinary heritage as a form of "gastrodiplomacy," leveraging the universal appeal of food to build soft power, foster cross-cultural understanding, and strengthen economic ties. Essentially, the dinner table has become a new frontier for diplomacy, where a country's identity is shared, tasted, and remembered by the global community.

Countries use cuisine to build soft power, improve international relationships, promote tourism, and strengthen national branding. Culinary diplomacy demonstrates how culture and globalization intersect through something as universal as food.

III. GASTRODIPLOMACY AS A STRATEGIC TOOL

Gastrodiplomacy is increasingly recognized as a strategic form of public diplomacy that engages foreign communities while promoting a nation's image. While the use of food in diplomacy has ancient roots, branding national cuisine as part of a structured soft power strategy is relatively recent, especially for smaller or lesser-known countries seeking recognition. By leveraging culinary heritage, governments aim to stimulate economic growth through tourism, trade, and gastronomy while reinforcing national identity and unity.¹⁶

Public diplomacy seeks to influence foreign audiences and support national foreign policy. Gastrodiplomacy allows nations such as Malaysia, a multiracial state, to utilize its diverse cuisine as a soft power instrument. The Malaysian government actively promotes culinary initiatives to strengthen the national brand and enhance international influence.¹⁷ In Turkey, gastrodiplomacy also serves domestic purposes by shaping national identity. The 2021 cookbook project by Emine Erdoğan illustrates how food can be mobilized to advance political agendas connected to conservative gender norms and neoliberal cultural policies.¹⁸

This "soft power" is validated by UNESCO's recognition of national cuisines as intangible cultural heritage, which significantly elevates a nation's global brand and prestige. The scope of gastrodiplomacy is expanding through social gastronomy, where the inclusion of citizen advocates and refugee chefs turns cooking into a tool for social justice and humanitarian connection. This evolution was notably accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which reshaped the landscape by forging deeper, more resilient links between global food producers and local consumers.¹⁹ Beyond serving as mere nourishment, food has

emerged as a vital bridge for fostering cross-cultural empathy, trust, and global integration.

IV. MECHANISMS OF SOFT POWER THROUGH CUISINE

Food creates emotional connections and positive associations, softening cultural prejudices and generating interest in foreign cultures. Unlike language or elite cultural forms, cuisine offers a direct, communal sensory experience. Diaspora food culture preserves heritage while evolving through interaction with host societies, producing hybrid cuisines that reflect multiple cultural influences.

Cultural attraction plays a pivotal role in identity formation by providing the aesthetic, social, and moral frameworks through which individuals define themselves and their place in the world. When a person is drawn to the "soft power" of a culture, whether through its culinary traditions, arts, or values, they often internalize these elements, integrating them into their own self-conception. This process, often referred to as acculturation or cultural synthesis, allows individuals to build "hyphenated" or cosmopolitan identities that bridge their native heritage with global influences. By engaging with attractive cultural symbols, people find a sense of belonging and communal continuity, transforming abstract national traits into personal markers of identity that guide their behavior and social affiliations. Diaspora restaurants and food enterprises contribute to local economies and foster social networks that facilitate cultural exchange. Culinary festivals, pop-ups, and collaborations allow diaspora chefs to showcase their heritage, enhancing global visibility and generating soft power effects.

In the context of gastrodiplomacy, economic and social networks serve as the structural backbone that converts cultural interest into tangible national influence. When a government promotes its cuisine, it stimulates a "global value chain" that connects domestic farmers and exporters to international distributors and local restaurateurs. These networks facilitate the flow of specialized goods, such as authentic spices from Thailand or kimchi from Korea, creating a robust economic dependency and a steady export market.

Socially, these networks function through the creation of "culinary hubs" in foreign cities, where restaurants act as social anchors for both the diaspora and the local population. By bringing people together over a shared meal, these spaces foster intercultural dialogue and build "social capital," establishing a web of interpersonal trust that transcends borders. This combination of economic integration and social bonding creates a self-sustaining ecosystem where the nation's "soft power" is reinforced every time a consumer engages with the network.

As above we see Thailand, South Korea, and China utilize "gastrodiplomacy" to convert culinary heritage into measurable national influence and economic growth. While Thailand focuses on market expansion through standardized restaurant networks, South Korea leverages the global popularity of K-media to brand its food as a trendy lifestyle choice. China utilizes institutional partnerships and cultural festivals to frame its cuisine as a gateway to broader political and social engagement. Collectively, these strategies demonstrate how specialized economic supply chains and social networks can successfully elevate a nation's "soft power" on the world stage.

Despite its potential, diaspora culinary diplomacy faces structural barriers, including limited governmental support, market access constraints, and the risk of cultural commodification. Contributions of diaspora communities are often under-recognized in mainstream international relations scholarship, which typically emphasizes state actors.

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V. CONCLUSION

Diaspora communities constitute significant yet understudied actors in culinary diplomacy and soft power. Through everyday interactions, community networks, and the global circulation of food practices, diaspora cuisine facilitates cultural exchange, shapes perceptions, and cultivates influence beyond conventional diplomatic arenas. Recognizing diaspora culinary practices as soft power assets expands the analytical scope of cultural diplomacy and highlights the vital interplay between grassroots cultural expression and international relations.

In summary, culinary diplomacy within diaspora communities represents a transformative shift in how nations project influence and build international relationships. By moving beyond high-level statecraft and into the kitchens and neighborhoods of the world, food acts as a uniquely accessible and humanizing medium. The importance of this phenomenon lies in its ability to synthesize economic expansion with cultural empathy. As diaspora members navigate their dual identities, they create resilient "soft power" networks that outlast political cycles and bridge geographical divides. Ultimately, the "diplomacy of the plate" proves that global connectivity is most effectively achieved when it is tasted and shared, turning every meal into a quiet but powerful act of international cooperation.

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