

Chinese Food, Cultural Soft Power, and Building China's Brand

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Abstract:

In the age of globalization, competition between nations has shifted from the economic and the political to the cultural. Accordingly, cultural soft power has gained prominence as an important source of national influence. Chinese food, with its long history, regional diversity, symbolic meanings and close connection with everyday life, is a significant vehicle for the international expression of Chinese culture. Unlike literature, philosophy or high art, food is easier for foreign audiences to approach because it can be experienced through taste, smell, memory and social interaction. This article explores the role of Chinese food in China's cultural soft power and national image building. It argues that Chinese cuisine is not only a material product, but also a cultural symbol that carries ideas of family, harmony, festival tradition, regional identity and social exchange. Through restaurants, tourism, documentaries, social media and gastrodiploacy, Chinese food helps create cultural bridges between China and the outside world. The internationalization of Chinese cuisine can foster emotional identification, reduce cultural distance and enhance overseas audiences' image of China. However, the article also points out that the global spread of Chinese food may involve adaptation and simplification, which means that popularity does not automatically lead to deeper cultural understanding. Therefore, Chinese cuisine can contribute more effectively to China's soft power when it is presented together with historical background, cultural narratives and authentic local meanings. As a result, Chinese cuisine helps boost China's soft power and national brand in the modern era.

Keywords: Soft power; national image; Chinese food; cultural communication; globalization.

1. Introduction

In the modern world, relations between nations are not determined solely by economic and political factors, but also by cultural relations. Culture is playing a more significant role in shaping perceptions among countries. In this era of globalization, cultures and ways of life are being communicated and this gradually impacts perceptions of countries.

For instance, individuals might form a perception of a country through film, music or even foods that they experience. These ordinary cultural experiences are often more influential than formal political discourse because they enter people's lives in a natural and relaxed way. When people enjoy a cultural product repeatedly, they may gradually develop curiosity, familiarity and even affection toward the country behind it. In this sense, culture does not only communicate information; it also creates emotional impressions. Food is especially powerful in this process because eating is a universal human experience. Almost everyone can understand the pleasure of taste, the comfort of a shared meal and the memory attached to certain dishes.

Soft power works differently from hard power, which uses economic and military means to achieve its goals, as it does this in a more subtle way by attracting others. It is thus more sustainable. China has a long history and culture, and therefore has the potential to develop cultural soft power. Chinese food is one of the most accepted forms of culture: it is already popular in many countries. For many international visitors to China, the first taste of Chinese culture they receive is likely to be from Chinese food, not books or museums. In this sense, the globalization of Chinese cuisine provides a useful perspective for understanding cultural soft power and national image.

This article focuses on three main points of innovation. First, it treats Chinese cuisine not only as a cultural product, but also as an everyday medium through which foreign audiences encounter China in ordinary life. Second, it links the sensory experience of eating with emotional identification, arguing that taste, memory and shared dining can influence national image in a gradual and indirect way. Third, it emphasizes the tension between adaptation and authenticity in the globalization of Chinese food, showing that popularity alone does not necessarily lead to deeper cultural understanding. These points help explain why Chinese cuisine can function as a soft power resource only when it is connected with cultural narratives, local meanings and social contexts.

2. Theoretical Basis: Cultural Soft Power and National Image

The concept of "soft power" was first proposed by Joseph S. Nye and it is defined as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction [1]. The concept has been extensively used in international relations. Hard power is based on economic and military capabilities, whereas soft power is based on culture, ideas and political values. These combine with a nation's global image. For instance, nations with popular culture or desirable lifestyles can be more influential in the world without the need for military force. The term national image can be defined as the way foreign audiences view a country, including factors like politics, economics and culture. Of these, culture is particularly relevant because it can influence people's emotions and attitudes. They may not fully comprehend a country's political system, but they can relate to the country's cuisine and culture. This is why cultural communication often works through indirect and emotional channels. Foreign audiences may not immediately accept an official explanation of a country, but they may become interested in that country after watching a film, listening to music, visiting a restaurant or joining a festival. These experiences are small, but they can slowly accumulate into a broader national impression. From this perspective, national image is not built only by governments or diplomatic institutions. It is also shaped by countless daily encounters between people, products, images and stories. Research has demonstrated that countries with appealing cultures usually have greater international presence and even more diplomatic and cooperative opportunities. So, cultural soft power and national image are related, and cultural communication is vital in this process.

Moreover, cultural soft power should not be regarded as a static resource, but rather as a dynamic process that is cultivated through representation, communication and reception. A nation may have a vibrant culture, but that culture can only become a soft power resource if it is acknowledged, valued and emotionally embraced by others. Thus, national image is the result not only of political narratives and state messages, but also cultural encounters. These encounters can occur in everyday venues, such as restaurants, cinema, festivals, TV shows and websites, where people learn about another country in subtle and non-reactive ways. Thus, the connection between cultural soft power and national image is bi-directional: culture contributes to image, but also image impacts culture. When cultural symbols from a country are perceived as appealing, relatable, and relevant, they can contribute to a

positive image of the country. However, cultural symbols may have little impact if they are misinterpreted or isolated from their social context. As such, research on cultural soft power should not only focus on cultural products, but also on the mediums, situations and target audiences of cultural communication. Such a view offers a better theoretical lens through which to explore the role of Chinese cuisine in China's image building.

3. Cultural Value and Globalization of Chinese Cuisine

3.1 Chinese Cuisine as a Cultural Asset

Chinese cuisine is more than food; it also represents Chinese culture and identity. Chinese cuisine has many regional variations, like Sichuan, Cantonese and Shandong, reflecting the geographical and cultural differences across China. For example, Sichuan cuisine is often associated with spicy flavors and the use of peppercorns, which reflects both local taste preferences and the humid climate of the region. Cantonese cuisine, by contrast, is often known for freshness, light seasoning and delicate cooking methods, showing a different regional understanding of taste and health. Shandong cuisine has historically been connected with northern food culture and banquet traditions. These examples show that Chinese cuisine is not a single and fixed category. Rather, it is a complex cultural system formed by geography, history, migration, social customs and local identities.

Different regions use different cooking techniques and ingredients, due to local climate, history and geography. Chinese food has evolved with festivals, traditions, and everyday life for thousands of years. For instance, dumplings are eaten for the Spring Festival, and mooncakes for the Mid-Autumn Festival, which demonstrates the ties between food and culture. These foods are meaningful because they are connected with family reunion, seasonal rituals and collective memory. Dumplings are not only eaten for their taste, but also for the symbolic meaning of reunion and good fortune. Mooncakes similarly represent family gathering and the emotional imagination of home. Through these festival foods, cultural values are transmitted from one generation to another in a very concrete form. Even when overseas Chinese communities live far from China, preparing and eating these foods can still help maintain cultural identity. For foreign audiences, such foods also offer an accessible way to understand Chinese festivals and family values.

Chinese food is also balanced in terms of color, aroma, taste, and nutrients. This has to do with traditional con-

cepts such as yin and yang, harmony and balance, and the balance between humans and nature. Sometimes, these ideas are not explicitly stated, but are embodied in food preparation and eating. Therefore, a dish may represent more than its literal taste, even when its cultural meaning is not explicitly recognized by the consumer.

3.2 Globalization of Chinese Cuisine

The internationalization of Chinese cuisine happened over time, rather than being an overnight phenomenon. Chinese restaurants were first established to serve Chinese people living abroad, especially in areas where there were large numbers of Chinese people. In many overseas Chinese communities, restaurants were not only commercial spaces, but also social spaces where migrants could maintain familiar tastes, languages and customs. They provided a sense of belonging for people who were living in a different cultural environment. At the same time, these restaurants gradually became windows through which local residents could encounter Chinese culture. A restaurant menu, interior decoration, cooking style and service practice could all become part of cultural communication. Therefore, the overseas Chinese restaurant should not be seen only as a business institution. It can also be understood as an early and everyday platform for the global circulation of Chinese culture.

In time, more locals began to visit the restaurants to try something different and the restaurants transformed into cultural sites. In order to attract more local customers, restaurants might change the menu slightly to suit the taste of locals. For example, it may not be too spicy or sweet. This type of adaptation resulted in the popularity of Chinese food increasing globally, but it may be different to the original Chinese food. This creates a complicated relationship between popularity and authenticity. On the one hand, adaptation helps Chinese food enter local markets more easily because it reduces the cultural and sensory distance between Chinese cuisine and foreign consumers. On the other hand, excessive adaptation may weaken the original cultural meaning of the dishes. Some consumers may enjoy Chinese food without understanding its history, regional background or symbolic value. Therefore, the globalization of Chinese cuisine should be understood as a process of negotiation. It involves both cultural transmission and cultural transformation.

Now, this is taking place even faster with the internet and social media [2]. Photos and videos of Chinese food can now be shared more easily, which increases the visibility of Chinese cuisine. Food bloggers and YouTubers also help publicize Chinese food. Therefore, many scholars regard food as more than an object of consumption; it is

also a medium for intercultural communication and even diplomacy [3, 4].

3.3 Chinese Food, Media and Gastrodiplo-macy

Beyond restaurants, Chinese cuisine is also promoted via the media, tourism and cultural diplomacy. Gastrodiplo-macy experts have pointed out that food can be used as a soft power strategy because it tangibilises intangible national culture through taste. Therefore, food is not only eaten but also imagined. Through images, documentaries and online videos, audiences may develop an imagination of China before they actually visit the country or taste the food in person. A well-presented dish can suggest ideas of landscape, family, labour, tradition and regional beauty. This means that food media can transform cuisine into a visual and emotional narrative. The audience is not simply watching cooking techniques; they are also watching a story about people, places and ways of life. In this way, media representation expands the influence of food beyond the dining table. In East Asia, governments and tourism authorities have increasingly used food as a branding strategy and have shown that food can be associated with place branding, foreign policy, and nation branding [5, 6]. In China, this is clearly seen in Chinese food media. Food media programs such as *A Bite of China* connect food with place, family lineage, craftsmanship and custom [7]. Thus, Chinese food is not only about flavor but also about stories of place and culture [8]. Similarly, media shows may also influence tourism interests, with viewers becoming interested in the places and cultures that are represented in the media [9]. The advent of the internet, together with online interaction and social media sharing, has further enhanced the reach of Chinese food culture, making food an increasingly prominent medium of cultural representation.

4. China's National Image and Chinese Cuisine

Chinese cuisine has a profound effect on China's national brand. First, from a cognitive perspective, food is widely understandable and is usually less politically sensitive than many other topics. Therefore, it is a relatively accessible topic through which foreign audiences can learn more about China. Second, from an emotional perspective, positive dining experiences may spill over into more favourable attitudes toward the associated culture [3]. For example, if someone has a good experience at a Chinese restaurant, he or she may want to know more about China. Thirdly, from a social point of view, eating at Chinese restaurants offers a chance to exchange culture. Diners

often eat with friends and family members, which creates opportunities for cultural exchange. Such shared dining experiences help make cultural meanings more vivid and accessible. For example, the taste of dumplings and noodles can help one feel "close" to Chinese culture, and even "at home". These elements play a role in improving China's soft power.

However, not all the impacts of food are positive [4]. Food can create familiarity and interest, but it can also create a one-sided impression of a country if the consumers know only the products that are commercialized or highly adapted to the local market. In a sense, food globalization is both authentic and adapted [10]. Foods are sometimes hybridized in order to be more palatable but also less authentic. Therefore, fame does not necessarily lead to cultural awareness.

Therefore, Chinese food can promote national image more effectively when it is embedded in cultural narratives. For instance, when food is presented together with local history, festivals, cooking methods and place-based meanings, it is more likely to be associated with a more complex image of China [7, 10]. Therefore, food is more likely to function as a form of soft power when it is presented as both delicious and culturally meaningful. This shows that the relationship between food and national image involves both material experience and cultural representation.

5. Summary

In conclusion, Chinese cuisine plays an important role in China's cultural soft power not only because it is popular around the world, but also because it represents history, diversity, everyday life and cultural values. As a familiar and accessible cultural form, food allows international audiences to encounter Chinese culture in a direct and emotional way. Through restaurants, tourism, documentaries, social media and gastrodiplo-macy, Chinese cuisine helps create cultural connections between China and foreign audiences. It presents China not merely as an abstract nation, but as a living culture shaped by family traditions, regional identities, festival customs and shared social experiences.

At the same time, the global spread of Chinese food should not be understood only as a simple sign of cultural success. Popularity does not automatically produce deeper cultural understanding, especially when Chinese dishes are adapted, simplified or separated from their original historical and regional meanings. Therefore, Chinese cuisine can contribute more effectively to national image building when it is presented together with cultural narratives, local stories and authentic social contexts. In this way, Chinese food becomes more than a product for con-

sumption. It becomes a medium through which foreign audiences can better understand Chinese values, lifestyles and cultural imagination. Overall, Chinese cuisine remains a valuable and meaningful resource for strengthening China's cultural soft power and enhancing its national brand in the age of globalization.

However, this article still has several limitations. First, it mainly relies on literature-based discussion rather than empirical evidence, such as interviews, surveys or audience reception studies. Second, it discusses Chinese cuisine at a general level, so it does not fully compare how different overseas regions interpret Chinese food. Third, it focuses more on the positive role of cuisine in cultural soft power, while problems such as stereotypes, commercialization and cultural misunderstanding require further analysis. Future research may use specific case studies and audience data to examine how Chinese food actually influences foreign perceptions of China.

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