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Master Thesis

Culinary Politics in East Asia :  
The Role of Food Heritagization in  
the Development of China's National Brand Image



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## ABSTRACT

For the last fifteen years, China's foreign policy has been actively working on gaining influence worldwide by designing an appealing national image and promoting it abroad. In the context of the rise of gastronationalism in East Asia, culinary politics have recently become a new focus for the Chinese government to continue its identity efforts in a new direction, namely the development of an attractive national culinary narrative. Indeed, the promotion of a Chinese culinary identity can be seen as an additional step towards increasing China's cultural attractiveness. However, as East Asian countries benefit from foodways that might appear similar to the eyes of foreign markets, the shaping of each nation's culinary identity has quickly taken the form of an East Asian race to claims-making. While the reputation of Chinese culinary heritage has already been tarnished by numerous failed applications to the UNESCO List of ICH, China is now giving its identity strategy a second chance by following the footsteps of its neighboring rivals, namely Japan and South Korea. This thesis provides a comprehensive overview of China's position in this race to culinary heritagization where it definitely does not hold the position of forerunner. While it appears logically beneficial for China to reinforce its nation-branding efforts by shaping and promoting a powerful image of its national culinary identity, it is also very relevant to linger on the unique hindrances that China has to face in order to be able to compete with its neighbors in this race. This thesis analyzes how China has the opportunity to free itself from its past diplomatic failures in the field of culinary politics through the shaping of its diplomatic relations with the EU, and more specifically through the EU-China GI agreement on Geographical Indications ratified in 2020. It provides a new perspective on culinary politics, bypassing the protectionist claims surrounding gastronationalism in order to better focus on the topics of nation-branding and cultural identity in China.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
a. Background for culinary politics.....	4
b. Background for culinary politics in East Asia.....	9
c. Problem statement.....	11
<b>2. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>13</b>
a. Objectives of the thesis.....	13
b. Research design.....	14
c. Choice of theory.....	14
d. Data collection.....	16
<b>3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>17</b>
a. Gastronomicalism.....	17
b. Gastrodiplomacy.....	21
<b>4. ANALYSIS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
a. China’s controversial attempts at gastrodiplomacy.....	25
b. The potential behind EU-China relations regarding food heritagization.....	30
<b>5. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>6. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>36</b>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## a. Background for culinary politics

Cultural heritage is a strong component of a nation's identity<sup>1</sup>. According to UNESCO, cultural heritage can take different forms: it can be tangible (like monuments, paintings, books) or intangible<sup>2</sup>. Intangible cultural assets include traditional practices and customs, as well as know-how related to traditional crafts<sup>3</sup>. The protection and promotion of intangible forms of cultural heritage allow older generations to transmit knowledge and skills to younger generations, therefore reinforcing social cohesion and the sense of belonging to a community<sup>4</sup>. Intangible cultural heritage encompasses different traditional crafts, including gastronomy and food heritage. Gastronomy is the science that focuses on the cultural impact and societal influence of local flavors and cuisines<sup>5</sup>, while food heritage (also called culinary heritage) refers to elements that are identified as originating from the traditional cuisine of a local community, and that are therefore considered as part of the local cultural heritage. While food as a tangible object is used to “sustain collectives”, it also possesses a symbolic dimension. Indeed, gastronomy can serve to culturally represent these same collectives when it is approached as an intangible form of heritage<sup>6</sup>. For example, for the last twenty years, UNESCO has been implementing several strategies of protection efforts towards intangible cultural heritage at the international level. After adopting the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972, UNESCO ratified in 2003 the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)<sup>7</sup>, which allowed the establishment of two different lists registering some of the most prominent elements of ICH in the world based on the urgency of their safeguarding<sup>8</sup>. In 2010, UNESCO accepted the applications “Gastronomic Meal of the French”, “Traditional Mexican Cuisine” and “Gingerbread Craft from Northern Croatia” as ICH. This decision opened the door for

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Therese Albert “Culture, Heritage and Identity 1. Series of lectures on Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century - Opportunities and Challenges” Institute Heritage Studies Berlin, March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “Cultural Heritage.” UNESCO, July 21, 2022. <https://en.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/cultura/patrimonio>.

<sup>3</sup> “What Is Intangible Cultural Heritage?” UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Sabbag, Cigdem. “The Present and Future of Gastronomy against Global Threats.” *Gastronomy, Hospitality, and the Future of the Restaurant Industry*, 2022, 139–64.

<sup>6</sup> Chan, Yuk Wah, and James Farrer. “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.” *Asian Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2020): 1–11.

<sup>7</sup> Bestor, Theodore. “Most F(1)avored Nation Status: The Gastrodiplomacy of Japan's Global Promotion of Cuisine.” *Public Diplomacy*, January 2014. pp.59-62.

<sup>8</sup> “Browse the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices.” UNESCO. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>.

culinary heritage to obtain international recognition through its listing as ICH protected by a United Nations (UN) entity<sup>9</sup>. This opportunity is still currently very popular among countries that wish to assert their culinary heritage. In 2022, the French baguette was inscribed in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the term “Artisanal know-how and culture of baguette bread”<sup>10</sup>. This was a way for UNESCO and for The Confédération Nationale de la Boulangerie et Boulangerie-Pâtisserie Française (the French entity behind the original application) to offer recognition to the traditional techniques and the unique “sensory experience” that originated from the culinary heritage behind the baguette<sup>11</sup>.

The objectives behind the recognition and protection of culinary heritage go beyond the mere protection of local traditions. Like other forms of cultural heritage, the identification and promotion of culinary heritage can participate in the definition of a nation’s cultural identity. Foodways have been transmitted from generation to generation among local communities, and the preservation of these practices is at the roots of an important process of social integration and cohesion<sup>12</sup>. Agricultural and culinary traditions allow for a community to define itself around shared experiences and common knowledge, and to distinguish itself from others by pointing out the uniqueness of its local practices<sup>13</sup>. By getting involved in the safeguarding of these traditions and by providing support to local communities, state actors get involved in culinary politics, which has a strong impact on many aspects of governance<sup>14</sup>. First of all, culinary politics can have a profound economic and societal impact. Indeed, it can help empower local communities and individuals who possess fewer resources by giving more value to their production techniques and the product of their labor<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the protection of cultural heritage is often deeply connected with agricultural matters as it protects the use of traditional ways and know-how in food production. Therefore, culinary politics can lead to effective state strategies to support rural development and local agricultural ecosystems at the expense of industrialized supply chains<sup>16</sup>. Culinary politics can

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<sup>9</sup> op. cit. “Most F(l)avored Nation Status: The Gastrodiplomacy of Japan’s Global Promotion of Cuisine”

<sup>10</sup> “Artisanal Know-How and Culture of Baguette Bread.” UNESCO.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/artisanal-know-how-and-culture-of-baguette-bread-01883>.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Richard, Manon, and Madeleine Coste. “FOOD IS CULTURE : EU Policy Brief on Food & Cultural Heritage.” EUROPA NOSTRA, October 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Felice Farina “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”, in Miriam Castorina, Diego Cucinelli, *Food issues 食事. Interdisciplinary Studies on Food in Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, Firenze University Press, 2021, pp. 93-107.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> source ?

also help the state empower itself by gathering its citizens around a sense of belonging relying on a defined culinary cultural narrative. This strategy, defined by scholars as “gastronationalism”, takes advantage of the emotive link between food and national identity<sup>17</sup>. The objective of gastronationalist strategies is to encourage citizens to identify with national cuisine as a defined set of traditions and customs to help them emotionally connect with their national identity, and reinforce their attachment to their nation<sup>18</sup>. According to DeSoucey, gastronationalism can also be seen as a defensive strategy as it attempts to build up “symbolic boundaries” against what can appear as a threat to national culinary heritage, namely the homogenization of food practices provoked by globalization<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, gastronationalist discourses can be turned into powerful tools by politicians to rally citizens around a common vision of national identity.

Culinary politics and their influence on collective identity are also applicable at the supranational level, as we can see with the example of Geographical Indications (GIs) in the European Union (EU). The protection of Geographical Indications in the EU is a market regulating system which aims at helping consumers distinguish products whose quality is linked to their geographical origin (and therefore local traditional know-how)<sup>20</sup>. This specific type of intellectual property was established in the EU in 1992 for agricultural products, wines, and spirits, and it now relies on the legal framework defined by Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012, Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 and Regulation (EU) 2019/787<sup>21</sup>. For an agricultural product to be registered as a Geographical Indication in the EU, the competent Member State authority must send an application which will then be consulted and accepted by the European Commission, with the help of relevant committees<sup>22</sup>. The purpose of such registration for producers is to prove that the link between the quality of their product and its geographical origin is strong enough for the product to be worth distinguishing from products with a similar name that are present on the same market but which do not originate from the same place. For simple GIs, this link between quality and origin may solely lie in the reputation of the origin-linked product<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, products that already benefit from the

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<sup>17</sup> DeSoucey, Michaela. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.” *American Sociological Review* 75, no. 3 (2010): 432–55.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *op. cit.* “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiploacy”

<sup>20</sup> “Geographical Indications and Quality Schemes Explained.” European Commission.

<sup>21</sup> “GI Protection in Europe .” oriGIn, March 21, 2022.

[https://www.origin-gi.com/web\\_articles/gi-protection-in-europe-en-gb-4/](https://www.origin-gi.com/web_articles/gi-protection-in-europe-en-gb-4/)

<sup>22</sup> Härtel, Ines, and Lian Zhong. “The Right of Geographical Indications of Agricultural Products and Food.” *Handbook of Agri-Food Law in China, Germany, European Union*, 2018, 611–41.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

popularity of their place of origin (origin-linked products) compete with other products which might appear identical to consumers but which in reality share neither the same means of production nor the same place of origin. Therefore, the GI legislation prevents consumers from being potentially confused as to which product actually respects the means of production and the place of origin expected from an origin-linked product. For example, Champagne is a specific type of GI named Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). This specific label means that the link between the product and its place of origin relies on more than just reputation, as its quality is objectively resulting from the characteristics of the place of origin (be it the quality of the soil, the water, etc). It also means that for this product, all steps of production take place in the place of origin, namely the French region of Champagne<sup>24</sup>. Since 1973, Champagne has been registered in the EU (and originally in the EEC) as a PDO, which makes it illegal for any producer of sparkling wine to use the term Champagne to promote their own product on the European market as long as it doesn't fulfill the requirement of the PDO. The purpose here is to safeguard the traditional know-how behind the Champagne sparkling wine, as well as its reputation<sup>25</sup>.

By establishing a comprehensive GI protection system at the European level, the EU made an extensive effort to preserve and promote European "living cultural and gastronomic heritage"<sup>26</sup>. From a cultural point of view, the GI protection scheme serves two main goals. Domestically, GIs can be seen as a tool in the construction of a common European cultural narrative. Indeed, the EU GI register acts as a register for "terroir", as it highlights the intangible link between food and locality within the EU territory<sup>27</sup>. By adding value to this sense of place, the EU Institutions use food heritage to reflect "shared history, memory, and multiple identities" at the supranational level<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the promotion of selected GIs at the European level has the potential to bring more legitimacy to the European Union as the representative of the European cultural identity through the protection of culinary heritage. Nevertheless, while any nation or supranational union is capable of internally shaping a collective cultural identity based on a defined culinary heritage, this doesn't mean that foreign actors will envision this narrative the same way. This is why foreign policies also play

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Haeck, Catherine, Giulia Meloni, and Johan Swinnen. "The Value of Terroir: A Historical Analysis of the Bordeaux and Champagne Geographical Indications." *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 41, no. 4 (2019): 598–619.

<sup>26</sup> European Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) No 1151/2012, art. 1, 2012 (L 343) 8

<sup>27</sup> Ranta, Ronald, and Atsuko Ichijo. "Introduction: Food, Nationalism and National Identity." *Food, National Identity and Nationalism. Food and Identity in a Globalising World*, 2022, 1–23.

<sup>28</sup> *op. cit.* "FOOD IS CULTURE : EU Policy Brief on Food & Cultural Heritage."

a significant role in the definition of a nation's culinary identity. For example, the European Union first pushed for international recognition of Geographical Indications through the ratification of the TRIPS (Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property) Agreement in 1994<sup>29</sup>. This market regulating measure was introduced in articles 42 and 43 of the Agreement, distinguishing GIs for wines and spirits from GIs for other agrifood products. Both types of GI are protected by the TRIPS agreements from acts of unfair competition, namely from situations where agrifood producers wrongly suggest that the origin of their product is different from what it really is, leading to consumers being misled on the origin (and therefore the qualities) of the product<sup>30</sup>. Additional protection is provided by Article 43 solely for GI for wines and spirits, whose names cannot contain expressions such as “style” or “imitation”, as it may potentially relate to an origin-linked product without respecting the GI requirements<sup>31</sup>. This article also provides GI on wines and spirits with a stricter apprehension of “generic names”. Generic names are origin-linked product names that are recognized as being too commonly used in our daily life to be protected by the GI regulation. While Article 43 restricts the reference to “generic names” for wines and spirits, other agrifood products do not enjoy the same privilege. Indeed, while the EU has pushed for all GI products to be protected by the same strict regulations in the TRIPS Agreement, strong opposition was however received from countries such as the US and Australia<sup>32</sup>. This transatlantic conflict between the protectionist “Old World” and the more liberal “New World” has been a popular topic in GI literature since it was first coined in 2010 by Josling as the “War on terroir”<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, while the EU has been continuously pushing for origin-linked products to benefit from a custom-made protection system, the ‘New World’ countries claim that their already existing trademark system (including trademarks as well as collective marks) provides enough protection for origin-linked products. Moreover, the “New World” countries assert that a *sui generis* system for origin-linked products such as GIs actually goes against the concept of liberal market, as it is a protectionist measure aiming at favoring agrifood products from local producers over imports from foreign competitors, creating an unfair situation for exporters<sup>34</sup>. Despite the European wish for better recognition of

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<sup>29</sup> Josling, Tim. “The War on Terroir: Geographical Indications as a Transatlantic Trade Conflict.” *Journal of Agricultural Economics* 57, no. 3 (2006): 337–63.

<sup>30</sup> TRIPS: Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, Apr. 15, 1994, Marrakesh Agreement Establishing the World Trade Organization, Annex 1C, 1869 U.N.T.S. 299, 33 I.L.M. 1197 (1994)

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *op. cit.* “The War on Terroir: Geographical Indications as a Transatlantic Trade Conflict.”

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Farrer, James. “Eating the West and Beating the Rest: Culinary Occidentalism and Urban Soft Power in Asia's Global Food Cities.” (2010).



Geographical Indications as an international norm, the Doha round of negotiations for the TRIPS agreement led to a stalemate, as well as to great tension within transatlantic trade relations<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, as Josling explains it, the EU did not give up on raising recognition for its regulation system, and from 2010 onwards, it started introducing mutual recognition for GI products within preferential trade agreements signed with various significant trade partners such as South Korea, South Africa, Canada or Japan<sup>36</sup>. This alternative allowed the EU to defuse the tension in international trade by preferring bilateral paths over multilateral ones to advocate for the implementation of stricter GI protection<sup>37</sup>.

### **b. Background for culinary politics in East Asia**

Over the last twenty years, culinary politics have started to gain momentum in East Asia as a new form of identity politics<sup>38</sup>. Indeed, by getting involved in the definition of their own national culinary heritage, countries like Japan and South Korea have understood they could access new political, economic, and diplomatic resources essential to their national development. With the most recent economic growth known by East Asian countries these last decades, Asian cultural references have spread over the world and gained in popularity, making culture, and more specifically gastronomy, a strong source of soft power for East Asian countries<sup>39</sup>. In response to the emergence of new opportunities in foreign markets, East Asian nation-states have shown a growing interest in culinary politics, notably by adopting new strategies aiming at reshaping their national culinary identity around their most emblematic foodways<sup>40</sup>. While “Asian cuisines traveled and mingled before the rise of modern nation-states”<sup>41</sup>, their interactions have led to the merging of various East Asian foodways, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of certain food products and culinary traditions<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, East Asian countries are now attempting to reclaim specific food products and foodways by asserting their belonging to the national culinary heritage through the use of different political tools available at the national and supranational levels.

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<sup>35</sup> op. cit. “The War on Terroir: Geographical Indications as a Transatlantic Trade Conflict.”

<sup>36</sup> Huysmans, Martijn. “Exporting Protection: EU Trade Agreements, Geographical Indications, and Gastronomicalism.” *Review of International Political Economy* 29, no. 3 (2020): 979–1005.

<sup>37</sup> Park, SunHee. “Taking Cultural Goods Seriously: Geographical Indications and the Renegotiation Strategies for the Korea-EU FTA.” *Global Policy* 11, no. S2 (2020): 23–30.

<sup>38</sup> Walravens, T. “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronomicalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”. Queen Mary University of London. 2020.

<sup>39</sup> op. cit. “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.”

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> op. cit. “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronomicalism and gastrodiplomacy”

For instance, Japan has been relying on tools created by the international community in order to build a successful identity strategy since the early 2000s. Indeed, international institutions such as UNESCO strongly support the preservation of customs and food culture, therefore offering golden opportunities to nation-states that wish to assert their culinary identity by obtaining international recognition of their foodways.<sup>43</sup> The inscription of *washoku* in the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) on December 5, 2013, under the full designation “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year” was Japan’s most powerful move in terms of culinary politics<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, as explained by F. Farina in “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”, the country has been making use of *washoku*, a Japanese tradition around the creation of harmonious meals based on the use of local dishes, to increase the appeal of Japanese food heritage domestically as well as abroad<sup>45</sup>. Through this application to the UNESCO List of ICH, the Japanese government aimed at redefining Japanese culinary heritage in order to revitalize its “Cool Japan” soft power strategy and spread a positive image of Japanese culinary culture on foreign markets<sup>46</sup>. This decision was supported by the foreigners’ craze over Japanese food. In 2008, the Japanese National Tourism Office released in 2008 a survey reporting that for 65.4% of foreign tourists, the main reason behind their trip to Japan was “to eat Japanese cuisine”.<sup>47</sup> This strategy was a success, as it resulted in a huge increase in Japanese agrifood exports from 2013 onwards<sup>48</sup>.

Through such “vigorous state-led culinary politics”<sup>49</sup>, nation-states have the opportunity to shape or reshape their national culinary identity in ways that can help them gain momentum domestically and abroad. The pillars of a national culinary identity are what Y.W. Chan and J. Farrer refer to as “food memories”<sup>50</sup>. Food memories are not only memories created by the physical contact of our senses with food, but they also stem from the social and cultural connotations we associate with food. Food has the power to urge nostalgic feelings in people concerning different aspects of their identity (notably to their sense of belonging to a place, to an ethnicity or to a nation)<sup>51</sup>. The concept of “food memories” is the most obvious

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<sup>43</sup> Hongcheng, Zhou. “Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose up at Chinese Food.” *SixthTone*, January 16, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> op. cit. “Most F(l)avored Nation Status: The Gastrodiplomacy of Japan's Global Promotion of Cuisine.”

<sup>45</sup> op. cit. “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> op. cit. “Most F(l)avored Nation Status: The Gastrodiplomacy of Japan's Global Promotion of Cuisine.”

<sup>48</sup> op. cit. “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> op. cit. “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.”

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

when studying a nation's diaspora, where expatriates' sense of national identity can transcend the geographical separation from their nation through the nostalgia induced by food<sup>52</sup>. Food memories can be manufactured or reshaped through culinary politics when governments attempt to rebuild their national culinary narrative. For instance, by applying for UNESCO recognition in 2013, South Korea used *kimjang* (the traditional way of preparing and sharing *kimchi*) and the social dimension of this tradition shared among generations in families so as to emphasize the importance of family values within Korean culinary heritage, and more largely, as a cultural asset<sup>53</sup>. The promotion of such cultural heritage through the international platform provided by UNESCO allowed South Korea to use food memories in order to reshape its international image and make its culture more appealing.

### c. Problem statement

As stated earlier, since East Asian countries benefit from foodways that might appear similar to the eyes of foreign markets, the shaping (or reshaping) of each nation's culinary identity has quickly taken the form of an East Asian race to claims-making. Japan and South Korea are now leading this race to gastrodiploacy by promoting their culinary heritage by integrating the UNESCO List of ICH or by asserting the protection of their origin-linked products on the EU market through bilateral agreements. Nevertheless, it seems that China is now starting to follow this trend, as it has expressed the safeguarding and promotion of its national food heritage as a matter of national interest<sup>54</sup>. For the last fifteen years, China's foreign policy has been actively working on gaining influence worldwide by designing an appealing national image and promoting it abroad. This top-down endeavor has covered many fields such as sports with the Beijing Olympics in 2008, or innovation with the Shanghai World Expo in 2010<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, most of its focus has been on developing projects that put forward an appealing image of China's national cultural identity<sup>56</sup>. While the Chinese government created the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in 1987, it took almost two more decades for China to launch the Chinese Bridge project<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Cwiertka, Katarzyna & Miho, Yasuhara. *Branding Japanese Food: From Meibutsu to Washoku*. 2020.

<sup>54</sup> European Union. "AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON COOPERATION ON, AND PROTECTION OF, GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS." Official Journal of the European Union, December 4, 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Nye, Joseph S., and Jack Landman Goldsmith. "The Future of Power." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 64, no. 3 (2011): 45–52.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Blanchard, Jean-Marc F., and Fujia Lu. "Thinking Hard about Soft Power: A Review and Critique of the Literature on China and Soft Power." *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 4 (2012): 565–89.

This governmental initiative aimed at increasing China's appeal through the financing of Confucius Institutes and other educational entities to improve access to learning opportunities regarding the Chinese language and culture<sup>58</sup>. In the context of the rise of gastronationalism in East Asia, culinary politics have recently become a new focus for the Chinese government to continue its identity efforts in a new direction, namely the development of an attractive national culinary narrative. Indeed, the promotion of a Chinese culinary identity can be seen as an additional step towards increasing China's cultural attractiveness. While the reputation of Chinese culinary heritage has already been tarnished by numerous failed applications to the UNESCO List of ICH, China is now giving its identity strategy a second chance by following the footsteps of its neighboring rivals, namely Japan and South Korea. This thesis provides a comprehensive overview of China's position in this race to culinary heritagization where it definitely does not hold the position of forerunner. While it appears logically beneficial for China to reinforce its nation-branding efforts by shaping and promoting a powerful image of its national culinary identity, it is also very relevant to linger on the unique hindrances that China has to face in order to be able to compete with its neighbors in this race. This thesis analyzes how China has the opportunity to free itself from its past diplomatic failures in the field of culinary politics through the shaping of its diplomatic relations with the EU, and more specifically through the EU-China GI agreement on Geographical Indications ratified in 2020. It provides a new perspective on culinary politics, bypassing the protectionist claims surrounding gastronationalism in order to better focus on the topics of nation-branding and cultural identity. The following research questions will guide us through our analysis: To what extent can China shape its own national culinary identity despite its competition in East Asia?

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### a. Objectives of the thesis

The early research work for this thesis focused on the theme of culinary politics. It led to the compilation of a large amount of literature related to the protection of Geographical Indications within the EU, as well as the export of this unique EU policy in East Asia through bilateral trade agreements. The EU has indeed already developed an impressively complex culinary identity, relying on both the diversity of national traditions present within its borders and the strong feelings of gastronationalism shared by its people. This has led to the development of an extensive literature on intellectual property issues in culinary politics since 2006, with a special focus from scholars on the transatlantic conflict between the EU and the US during the ratification of the TRIPS Agreement. Coined by Josling as “War on Terroir” in 2006, the debate opposing *sui generis* systems and conventional trademark systems for the protection of origin-linked products and the study of European gastronationalism was developed by a large panel of scholars such as M. DeSoucey<sup>59</sup>, M. Huysmans<sup>60</sup>, C. Lister<sup>61</sup> or V. Raimondi<sup>62</sup>. By participating in the literature about state involvement in culinary politics and food heritagization, this thesis aims at changing the geographical focus of studies on culinary politics from the transatlantic region to the East Asian one. Indeed, the main objective of this thesis is to fill the gap in the literature related to the emergence of gastronationalism and gastrodiplomatic strategies in East Asian countries. While the developing East Asian interest in culinary politics was recently noticed by scholars such as M. King<sup>63</sup>, J. Farrer<sup>64</sup>, or F. Farina<sup>65</sup>, the amount of literature studying the evolution of culinary politics in this region is still scarce in comparison with its Western counterpart. Therefore, this thesis aims at providing scholars and lawmakers with enough context regarding culinary politics in East Asia, and more specifically in China, in order to provide a better understanding of cultural considerations when studying the bilateral diplomatic relations between the European Union and China.

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<sup>59</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>60</sup> op. cit. “Exporting Protection: EU Trade Agreements, Geographical Indications, and Gastronationalism.”

<sup>61</sup> Lister, Charles. "Protectionism and Integration: Designations of Origin for Foodstuffs in the European Community," *Food and Drug Law Journal* 47, no. 6 (1992): 639-656

<sup>62</sup> Raimondi, Valentina, Chiara Falco, Daniele Curzi, and Alessandro Olper. “Trade Effects of Geographical Indication Policy: The EU Case.” *Journal of Agricultural Economics* 71, no. 2 (2019): 330–56.

<sup>63</sup> King, Michelle Tien. *Culinary nationalism in Asia*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> op. cit. “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.”

<sup>65</sup> op. cit. “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”

## **b. Research design**

The research design of this thesis is based upon an empirical analysis that attempts to answer the following research question: To what extent can China shape its own national culinary identity despite its competition in East Asia?. This empirical analysis consists of a document study that reviews a large collection of primary and secondary data through the lens of a specific theoretical framework based on two main axes: gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy. The reasoning behind such a research design is that while all the necessary data to answer the previously quoted research question is already present in publicly available primary and secondary sources, it has yet never been compiled together to the extent of our knowledge. Therefore, this document study aims at continuing the discussion upon gastronationalist and gastrodiplomatic perspectives on East Asian culinary politics from a new angle: the reconstruction of a Chinese national culinary identity. Indeed, while the literature on Chinese culinary identity is very narrow, this thesis uses the literature on the rise of gastronationalism in rival neighboring countries such as Japan and South Korea to provide a comprehensive portrayal of China's position in the East Asian race to culinary identification.

The theoretical section of this thesis focuses on introducing gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy as complementary concepts in the study of culinary politics in East Asia. In this thesis, the analysis is divided into two distinct parts. The first part aims at developing the reasoning behind China's past failures to assert a strong culinary identity so as to acquire international recognition. This first part of the analysis relies on a multi-scale approach as it focuses on failed attempts to obtain recognition with the help of international institutions, as well as in the sphere of bilateral relations. The second part of the analysis showcases the new opportunities that China has created for itself by following in the footsteps of its neighbors in the creation of a culinary identity easy to export.

## **c. Choice of theory**

The analysis described above is based on a theoretical framework that fully relies on the complementarity between two distinct concepts: gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy. Gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy are two concepts that take on a constructivist approach in order to explain the role of culinary heritage within the definition of a nation's authenticity and its accumulation of soft power. While nations use gastronationalism to strengthen the ideas of national identity and national symbolic borders, they also make use of

gastrodiplomatic strategies to promote this national identity abroad in order to enhance their international image. These two concepts are not to confuse with culinary diplomacy, which is the use of food and cuisine as “a medium to enhance formal diplomacy in official diplomatic functions”<sup>66</sup>, or with food diplomacy, which is “the use of food aid and food relief in the periods of crisis or catastrophe”<sup>67</sup>.

The most emblematic work on gastronationalism was carried out by DeSousey in 2010 in “Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union”. DeSousey highlights the emotive link between food as an element of cultural heritage, individual identity, and the nation as a collective entity. Her work allows us to see how gastronationalism can be used to reshape collective identities through the dialectic opposing identity politics to the homogenous tendencies caused by globalization. Indeed, according to DeSousey, nations define and promote a culinary narrative made up of traditional foodways and food memories which are threatened to disappear because they are not adapted to the industry model fostered by globalization and the global food industry. By providing state protection, nations declare a defined culinary heritage as a national resource and assert their national identity by getting involved in the protection of unique food traditions that help them distinguish themselves from the homogenous trends of the globalized world.

Regarding the concept of gastrodiplomacy, most of the theoretical work around this notion in this thesis relies on the work of Paul Rockower regarding gastrodiplomacy. His article “A Guide to Gastrodiplomacy” analyzes the theoretical roots of gastrodiplomacy, describing it as a branch of cultural diplomacy, which itself belongs to the field of public diplomacy. It also shows how gastrodiplomatic strategies participate in nation-branding efforts through the promotion of a clearly defined culinary heritage at the international scale. Rockower also connects gastrodiplomacy with Nye’s concept of soft power, which we study further through J. Farrer’s perspective on “culinary soft power”.

Gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy provide the ideal theoretical framework for this thesis as they allow for the analysis to showcase a double perspective on the issue at hand. Indeed, gastronationalism first provides an inward vision of the development of culinary politics from the Chinese nation as a cultural entity. On the other hand, gastrodiplomacy gives a second dimension to the analysis as it provides the context to view China’s attempt at reshaping its culinary identity from an international perspective.

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<sup>66</sup> Rockower, Paul. “A Guide to Gastrodiplomacy.” *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, 2020, 205–12.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

#### d. Data collection

This thesis mainly relies on qualitative data retrieved from primary as well as secondary sources of documents. As culinary politics has become more central in Asian literature since 2010<sup>68</sup>, most of the qualitative data collected for this thesis stems from peer-reviewed literature connecting the concepts of gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy to the emerging quest for soft power in East Asia. This specific topic was greatly studied by Y.W. Chan and J. Farrer in 2021 in their joint article for the *Asian Anthropology* journal<sup>69</sup>. F. Farina and Park S.H. have extended the research in this sector, by respectively focusing on Japanese and South Korean strategies. The data regarding culinary politics in China was retrieved from literature by M.T. King, as well as from the *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Culture and Society*. Data collection for this thesis was completed through the use of primary sources, such as official texts of law and agreements. Official texts of EU law and the TRIPS agreement provided the data necessary to comprehend the stakes behind the establishment and recognition of Geographical Indications in the EU and within EU bilateral trade relations. Preferential trade agreements ratified by the EU with East Asian nations also helped gather relevant data to observe the influence of gastronationalist strategies of each country in their relations with the EU. Finally, this analysis relies on secondary sources such as news articles from Western media companies analyzing the impact of the Chinese gastrodiplomatic strategy on its applications for the UNESCO List of ICH and on the *kimchi* food scandal opposing China to South Korea in 2005.

The main limitation met during the data collection for this thesis has remained to be the language barrier which was met when collecting data from Chinese sources. Indeed, in order to prevent misunderstandings related to a flawed understanding of the Chinese language and writing style, the only Chinese sources explicitly used in this thesis are sources that already possessed an official and publicly available English translation during the time of data collection.

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<sup>68</sup> op. cit. “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.”

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*



### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, the concept of gastronationalism explains how food can help shape national culinary identities, while the concept of gastrodiploacy focuses on how food can help communicate national culinary identities across borders.

#### a. **Gastronationalism**

First of all, it is necessary to have a broad understanding of the concept of nationalism in order to understand gastronationalism. As DeSoucey underlines in her work on gastronationalism in the EU<sup>70</sup>, one of the most relevant definitions of nationalism would be Brubaker's, who defines nationalism as "a set of idioms, practices, and possibilities available in cultural and political life, delimited by social or physical boundaries"<sup>71</sup>. Nationalism may therefore be perceived as the idea that a nation's people is defined, or defines itself as a distinct community not only through the definition of geographical boundaries, but also based on shared cultural and political considerations<sup>72</sup>. The justification for gastronationalism would therefore be at the heart of the "cultural roots" of nationalism<sup>73</sup>. Indeed, gastronationalism encourages us to particularly focus on the role of food as a cultural and political tool in the shaping of nationalist feelings and claims. DeSoucey pushes the understanding of gastronationalism even further in her work, as she highlights the mutual effects of foodways and nationalist feelings on each other<sup>74</sup>. According to her, gastronationalism does not only signal "the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment", but it also indicates "the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food"<sup>75</sup>. Indeed, while foodways can be used by entities in order to shape the national identity around the values and traditions symbolized by a defined culinary heritage, gastronationalist discourses also encourage people to make food consumption choices based on their attachment to their country's culinary heritage. Therefore, gastronationalism is not a linear concept, but a circular one where cultural, policy, and market development evolve together.

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<sup>70</sup> op. cit. "Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union."

<sup>71</sup> Brubaker, Rogers. *Nationalism Reframed : Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 1996.

<sup>72</sup> op. cit. "Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union."

<sup>73</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. "Introduction." In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 12–15. London: Verso, 2016.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*

- Gastronationalism and national identity

The concept of gastronationalism is deeply embedded with the notion of national identity. National identity is here defined as the feeling of belonging to a nation, or an “imagined political community”, as B. Anderson calls it. Indeed, individuals from a nation imagine as being part of a collective of people whom they do not know personally, but with whom they acknowledge sharing the same political environment<sup>76</sup>. B. Anderson qualifies nations as being “both inherently limited and sovereign”<sup>77</sup>. We will insist here on the limited aspect of nations and what it implies for the role of gastronationalism in the construction of national identities. Anderson locates the limits of a nation where the territory of other nations begins<sup>78</sup>. This statement is also applicable to national identities, whose definition strongly relies on the boundaries between “us” and “the others”. These boundaries are shaped by what A.B. Kipnis calls “nation-building” :

*[...] I define nation-building to include any activity, planned or not, that increases the degree of commonality in lived experiences and communicative practice among people living in a particular country, especially those that simultaneously help to bridge local differences and to distinguish citizens of one country from those of another, but also including those that increase commonality across both the country and the globe (such as education in mathematics, which is commonly called globalization).<sup>79</sup>*

In this definition of nation-building, A.B. Kipnis highlights the role of common experiences at two different levels in the construction of national identity. Indeed, the sharing and recognition of commonality within one’s country help people overlook the difference in local practices within their nation to the profit of the distinction with “foreigners”, with whom they share a lesser amount of common experiences<sup>80</sup>. The concept of national identity does not erase the feelings of local attachment, nevertheless, it allows people who share a higher degree of commonality to identify under a common vision of national identity<sup>81</sup>.

Food can play a fundamental role in delineating this distinction between a nation’s people and foreigners, or between “us” and “the others”<sup>82</sup>. Indeed, when food is used to define or reshape the national culinary heritage, it becomes one of the identity markers which

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Kipnis, Andrew B. “Constructing Commonality: Standardization and Modernization in Chinese Nation-Building.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 3 (2012): 731–55.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *op. cit.* “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”

contribute to the construction of an authentic national identity: culinary traditions and experiences shared among the people of one nation across generations increase the degree of commonality among this nation's individuals and therefore intensify their sense of belonging to that nation<sup>83</sup>.

- Gastronationalism and state actors

Gastronationalism focuses on the social and cultural assets that are associated with food in the collective memory, and connects these assets to the political sphere by involving the “material, commercial, and institutional processes that shape foods” at the core of culinary politics<sup>84</sup>. According to Walravens, gastronationalism is “a governmental practice aimed at protecting national and regional interests”, as well as “a public discourse of belonging through food”<sup>85</sup>. Indeed, the main goal of gastronationalist strategies at the state level is to define a national culinary narrative by institutionalizing the protection of culinary products and traditions that are considered as part of the local culinary heritage<sup>86</sup>. This institutionalization process often requires for these food products and traditions to be systematically grounded in their place of production in the collective mind, in order for people to subconsciously associate these specific food items with their geographical origin, creating therefore a strong sense of place. This process gave birth to the concepts of “geographical indication” and “origin designation”. While geographical indications focus on this particular link between a food item and its place of origin in the collective mind, origin designation is a more precise concept as it “incorporates the unique material roles of soil, climate, and the specialized knowledge that accompanies generations of food producers tied to a particular locale; it is the materiality of the food ingredient in its raw form that is valued”<sup>87</sup>. These concepts are at the roots of the *sui generis* system adopted by the EU for the protection of origin-linked products<sup>88</sup>. The narrative used to justify the protection of food heritage also has the power to transcend boundaries. In her work, DeSoucey uses the example of foie gras to explain how the social values behind the preparation and the consumption of foie gras are used in France in order to justify the need for the industry of foie gras despite the claims of animal cruelty behind its preparation. In 2006, foie gras was recognized as

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<sup>83</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>84</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>85</sup> Walravens, T. “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronationalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”. Queen Mary University of London. 2020.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> op. cit. “The War on Terroir: Geographical Indications as a Transatlantic Trade Conflict.”

“cultural and gastronomic heritage” in France. Through this example, we can see that the family values associated with foie gras as an element of French culinary heritage transcend the concerns of civil society regarding the “gavage” method used in the production of foie gras. Therefore, by shaping a clearly defined culinary heritage, state actors have the power to prioritize the promotion of the national culinary narrative over negative claims, that are then perceived as attacking precious collective values<sup>89</sup>.

When used to shape the national culinary heritage, food is perceived by state actors as a source of national interest. Asserting claims to food as a national cultural resource leads state actors to protect designated food products and foodways from “competing claims”<sup>90</sup>. It also entails that attacks against these designated food products and foodways are to be considered as assaults on national heritage and culture, and not just on market products themselves anymore<sup>91</sup>. In this context, gastronationalism established by state actors can be seen as a protectionist strategy aiming at re-establishing cultural boundaries that were put aside in favor of globalization and the intrinsic trend of food homogenization<sup>92</sup>. In her work, DeSoucey describes gastronationalism as a result of the « juxtaposition » of food and homogenizing tendencies intrinsic to the process of globalization. Indeed, gastronationalism as a dialectic marks the development of new forms of identity politics that have emerged as a response to the homogeneity of domestic markets increasing with their progressive integration into the globalized world. Therefore, gastronationalism is for state actors a protectionist reaction to potential losses of control on the food industry that are induced by globalization<sup>93</sup>. State actors with gastronationalist ideals act as « ideological agents » by defining which cultural goods are worth protecting, but also by drawing the boundaries between national and foreign foodstuffs, by intervening in the regulation of their domestic market<sup>94</sup>. This attitude does not solely serve an ideological interest related to identity politics. Indeed, it also fulfills commercial interests. State intervention in favor of local culinary heritage can help boost the domestic consumption of local agrifood products, in opposition to imported products<sup>95</sup>. For instance, in 2013, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and

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<sup>89</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>90</sup> Ranta, Ronald, and Atsuko Ichijo. “Chapter Six: National Food in the International Context II—Gastronationalism and Populism”. *Food, National Identity and Nationalism. Food and Identity in a Globalising World*, 2022.

<sup>91</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>92</sup> op. cit. “Chapter Six: National Food in the International Context II—Gastronationalism and Populism”

<sup>93</sup> op. cit. “Gastronationalism : Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union.”

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> op. cit. “The politics of washoku: Japan’s gastronationalism and gastrodiplomacy”

Fisheries (MAFF) saw in the *washoku* application for the ICH label an opportunity to encourage Japanese people to increase their consumption of local products by showing them the value of Japan's culinary heritage through the procurement of international recognition for *washoku*<sup>96</sup>. Gastronationalist strategies at the state level can therefore be perceived as a way to not only support local food producers and industries, but also to reduce the country's dependence on imported products<sup>97</sup>.

## b. Gastrodiplomacy

Food does not only take part in constructing national identities, it can also serve as a great tool when communicating them outside of national borders<sup>98</sup>. As "food can function as a non-threatening way to gain favor among and make a connection with a foreign audience"<sup>99</sup>, gastrodiplomacy is essentially the use of food as a means to communicate the "distinctness of a nation's unique culture" to foreign audiences<sup>100</sup>. As part of the public diplomacy field, gastrodiplomacy is a form of cultural diplomacy, which conceptualizes the use of intangible forms of culture (art, music, etc.) to communicate a nation's cultural heritage to foreign publics<sup>101</sup>. While Rockower claims that "public diplomacy is a field predicated on the communication of policy, culture and values to foreign publics"<sup>102</sup>, Cull defines cultural diplomacy as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmissions abroad"<sup>103</sup>. According to these definitions, gastrodiplomacy can be perceived as a tool for nations to make their culinary heritage known abroad, and therefore spread a positive image of their culture through the attractiveness of their national cuisine's flavors. In opposition to some other forms of cultural diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy gives access to a nation's culture through a very familiar vehicle: the sense of taste<sup>104</sup>. Instead of communicating cultural values through streams of rational information, gastrodiplomacy uses sensory interactions and emotional connections to "shape long-term cultural perceptions"

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Pham, Mary Jo A. "Food as Communication: A Case Study of South Korea's Gastrodiplomacy", *The Diplomatist*. January 25, 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Wilson, R. "Cocina Peruana Para El Mundo: Gastrodiplomacy, the culinary nation brand, and the context of national cuisine in Peru". *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* (2011) (2) : 13 – 20 .

<sup>100</sup> Rockower, Paul S. "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8, no. 3 (2012): 235–46.

<sup>101</sup> *op. cit.* "A Guide to Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>102</sup> *op. cit.* "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>103</sup> Cull, N. "Public diplomacy: Taxonomies and history". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2008) 616 (1) : 31 – 54 .

<sup>104</sup> *op. cit.* "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy."

among foreign audiences<sup>105</sup>. Contrarily to culinary diplomacy<sup>106</sup>, gastrodiplomatic strategies are based on state-to-public communication in an attempt to communicate the national culinary culture to the broadest audience possible<sup>107</sup>.

- Gastrodiplomacy at the state level

At the state level, gastrodiplomacy takes the shape of a broad public diplomacy strategy aiming at raising the nation's brand image on the international scene. While it is funded by state actors, its implementation may involve non-state actors such as NGOs<sup>108</sup>. There is a strong difference between gastronomicalist and gastrodiplomatic strategies at the state level. Indeed, as explained earlier, gastronomicalism aims at shaping a national culinary heritage based on food memories and traditions that are already shared within the community. Therefore, gastronomicalism enhances the social and cultural dimensions of food memories that already exist in the collective memory in order to reinforce people's sense of belonging to their nation. However, with gastrodiplomacy, there is a significant change in audience. Indeed, foreign markets do not already possess the food memories that are being summoned by the image and taste of the national culinary heritage. Therefore, gastrodiplomacy requires for the state to establish a strategy that promotes a positive image of its culinary culture to foreign publics "in a fashion that is more diffuse"<sup>109</sup>. This image is spread through marketing and promotional campaigns which aim at increasing food exports and/or culinary tourism within the country<sup>110</sup>. This whole process is conceptualized under the term "nation-branding". Anholt defines it as "a strategic, policy-making approach, designed to help places build on the strengths that will earn them a better reputation"<sup>111</sup>. Gastrodiplomatic strategies are efficient vehicles of nation-branding as they can help foreign publics understand a country's national identity by raising awareness of its culinary identity<sup>112</sup>. The construction of an authentic national brand image is essential for a country to accumulate soft power and develop strong diplomatic relations based on cultural assets<sup>113</sup>.

- Gastrodiplomacy and culinary soft power

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<sup>105</sup> op. cit. "A Guide to Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>106</sup> as defined page 15

<sup>107</sup> op. cit. "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>108</sup> ibid.

<sup>109</sup> op. cit. "A Guide to Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>110</sup> Tettner, Samuel, and Begum Kalyoncu. "Gastrodiplomacy 2.0 : Culinary Tourism beyond Nationalism." *Journal of Tourism Research* 6, no. 2 (December 15, 2016): 47–55.

<sup>111</sup> Anholt, S. "Editor's forward to the first edition". *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2007) 1 (1) : 4 – 11.

<sup>112</sup> op. cit. "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy."

<sup>113</sup> ibid.

By broadening the cultural appeal of a nation, gastrodiploamacy reveals itself to be an effective way to increase soft power resources. Indeed, food is one of the material resources which most effectively help governments develop their nation's attractiveness and appeal<sup>114</sup>. As the juxtaposition of food and foreign policy, gastrodiploamacy uses national culinary heritage to build a resilient nation brand relying on cultural awareness, which in turn increases the power of attraction of a nation, or in other words, its soft power<sup>115</sup>. Farrer coined this concept as "culinary soft power": "the attractiveness and appeal of food culture that adheres to a nation, region or locality"<sup>116</sup>. By using the term "soft power", J. Farrer adds to the soft power theory developed by J. Nye<sup>117</sup>, which demonstrates the direct reliance of a nation's global ability to attract and influence others on its cultural assets, its political values, and its foreign policy<sup>118</sup>. In his work, Nye claims that cultural heritage may be perceived as an important policy tool when it is efficiently used in the context of public diplomacy<sup>119</sup>. According to Rockower, gastrodiploamacy mainly profits countries that wish to improve their "under-recognized" nation brand through the use of public diplomacy<sup>120</sup>. To Rockower, nation brands are "under-recognized" if the global public is unaware of their nation-branding efforts, or if these nation-branding efforts have had a counterproductive outcome, resulting in the global public holding a negative opinion of the nation<sup>121</sup>. "In this regard, gastrodiploamatic strategies engage in improving the cultural visibility of "under-recognized" nation brands through the global projection of their culinary heritage, therefore allowing nations to gain influence and recognition at the international level<sup>122</sup>. Among the examples of best practices in gastrodiploamacy, we can quote for example the "recognition of national cuisine or select dishes in the pantheon of [...] UNESCO's *intangible cultural heritage of humanity*" or "the furthering of access to authentic local ingredients for culinary outpost restaurants around the globe"<sup>123</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Farrer, James. "Eating the West and Beating the Rest: Culinary Occidentalism and Urban Soft Power in Asia's Global Food Cities." In *Globalization, Food and Social Identities in the Asia Pacific Region*, Tokyo: Sophia University Institute of Comparative Culture, 2010.

<sup>117</sup> *op. cit.* "Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries."

<sup>118</sup> Nye, Joseph S. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 616, no. 1, 2008, pp. 94–109.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *op. cit.* "A Guide to Gastrodiploamacy."

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

To sum up, gastrodiplomacy at the state level is part of a broader cultural diplomacy policy plan which aims at using the uniqueness of a nation's culinary heritage in order to appeal to foreign audiences. The main goal of gastrodiplomatic strategies is to bring international recognition to the national brand image shaped by state actors, and thus help the nation increase its soft power<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*



## 4. ANALYSIS

### a. China's controversial attempts at gastrodiplomacy

In 2007, while addressing the Seventeenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), then-President Hu Jintao announced that China should enhance its national culture “as part of the soft power” of its country<sup>125</sup>. This quest for soft power was developed over the years across many cultural fields such as sports<sup>126</sup>, education<sup>127</sup>, and tourism<sup>128</sup> so as to build and promote a comprehensive Chinese narrative reflecting a positive and appealing image of China as a nation-state. The use of gastronomy as a cultural asset to enhance China's soft power was marked by the nomination of Chengdu as the first UNESCO City of Gastronomy in Asia within the UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2010<sup>129</sup>. This newly-found international recognition of China's gastronomy led to a gradual shift in China's discourse towards its culinary heritage<sup>130</sup>. State-funded projects promoting local culinary traditions progressively showed more interest in foreign audiences, as we can see with *A Bite of China*, a culinary program whose first season started airing in English in 2012 on China Central Television (CCTV)<sup>131</sup>. However, China faced many rebuttals when attempting to gain international recognition for its national cuisine.

- The failed applications for UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Indeed, from 2007 onwards, China gradually looked to obtain different protection statuses for a selection of foodways representative of Chinese cuisine, in order to get international recognition of Chinese gastronomy as “traditional culture”<sup>132</sup>. The most memorable example of China's attempt at defining its national culinary heritage through the help of international institutions is the application of “Chinese cuisine” for UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

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<sup>125</sup> "Hu Jintao Stresses Enhancing "Soft Power" of Chinese Culture." *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, Oct 15, 2007.

<sup>126</sup> the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008

<sup>127</sup> the launching of Confucius Institutes in 2004

<sup>128</sup> for example, the organization in 2018 of the EU-China Year of Tourism

<sup>129</sup> Kuang, Lanlan. “China's Emerging Food Media: Promoting Culinary Heritage in the Global Age.” *Gastronomica* 17, no. 3 (2017): 68–81.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> McDonald, Garrett, and Adam Branson. “Geographic Indications Five-Year Plan Issued.” USDA, March 14, 2022.

In 2011, the Chinese Cuisine Association (CCA), a commercial association representing the food and catering industry under the supervision of the CCP, applied for “Chinese cuisine” to be given the protected status of ICH at the UNESCO level<sup>133</sup>. The ICH label would offer China the opportunity to make its culinary traditions more appealing to foreign markets, therefore enhancing its culinary soft power in accordance with Hu Jintao’s speech during the Seventeenth Party Congress of the CCP<sup>134</sup>. However, the request was denied two times, in 2011 as well as in 2014, after the CCA had sent a second application more respectful of UNESCO’s terms and criteria<sup>135</sup>. Despite China’s ratification of the UNESCO Convention for ICH in 2004, several scholars (P. Demgenski, H. Zhou) claimed that the main reason behind China’s failure rested on its misconception of the ICH label, as well as of its own national culinary heritage. Zhou Hengzhong analyzes how CCA’s failed application is proof that the general public in China misunderstands its own culinary heritage and prefers focusing on its commercial potential at the expense of its socio-cultural value<sup>136</sup>. Demgenski is more forgiving towards the Chinese general public: he defends that like France, Japan, and South Korea before it, China needs time to understand UNESCO’s vision of ICH and to adapt its discourse accordingly<sup>137</sup>.

In order to better comprehend the positions defended by these scholars, we can compare the application prepared by the CCA in 2014 with the *washoku* application filed by Japan in 2013. Indeed, in 2013, Japan successfully inscribed *washoku* to the UNESCO Representative List of ICH, making *washoku* the first East Asian culinary tradition to obtain the ICH label. The contrast between the Japanese accomplishment and China’s failure on the global scene caused tension to arise within the Chinese media. Titles such as “Kimchi and Washoku have successfully become ICH, which dishes should China pick?”<sup>138</sup> and “China Cuisine Association: Chinese cuisine will be submitted quickly in 2015 to avoid other countries taking it away”<sup>139</sup> started to appear in both the national and local press. This gastronationalist impulse held the CCA in a dynamic, as it was not only involved in a

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<sup>133</sup> Demgenski, Philipp. “Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine’s Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status.” *Asian Ethnology* 79, no. 1 (2020): 115–35.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Zhou, Hongcheng. “Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose up at Chinese Food.” SixthTone, January 16, 2017.

<sup>137</sup> *op. cit.* “Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine’s Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status.”

<sup>138</sup> Wang Haipeng. “Zhong can shen yi zhu da na dao cai?” [Kimchi and Washoku have successfully become ICH, which dishes should China pick?]. Beijing chen bao [Beijing morning post], 2014.

<sup>139</sup> Zeng Nai. “Zhongguo peng ren xie hui: Zhong can zui kuai 2015 nian shen yi fang ta guo qiang xian zhu ce” [China Cuisine Association: Chinese cuisine will be submitted quickly in 2015 to avoid other countries taking it away]. China News Network, July 3, 2014.

top-down initiative anymore, but it also had to fulfill people's expectations as well<sup>140</sup>. Between 2014 and 2015, the CCA decided to envision its application to the UNESCO List in a new light, showcasing Chinese cuisine categorized under "eight major cuisines" which are often referred to in official and popular discourses<sup>141</sup>. In the application, Chinese cuisine was explained from a dish-making point of view. It underlined the importance of traditional recipes and local ingredients, and boasted the unique know-how of the "chefs of China"<sup>142</sup>. However, such argumentation was bound to fail the UNESCO standards for inclusion displayed in the ICH Convention<sup>143</sup>. Indeed, by claiming that the knowledge of national culinary heritage was possessed by a group of high-end professionals, China promoted in its application an elitist vision of Chinese cuisine which contrasted with the social-ethnic values defended by UNESCO's definition of ICH. In comparison, Japan made the choice in 2013 to present *washoku* to the UNESCO jury panel in order to make a clear cut with its wish to nominate Japanese "imperial cuisines" a few years earlier<sup>144</sup>. In his work, P. Demgenski explains that Japan undeniably prepared its 2013 application in accordance with the UNESCO agenda on cultural diplomacy<sup>145</sup>. Indeed, it defined *washoku* as a socio-cultural practice involving both food-making and eating methods, setting it up in "grassroots" terms to show that the *washoku* tradition was perceived by most Japanese people as the representation of important family values and religious beliefs. The 2013 application also avoided *washoku* from being connected to any precise recipe or food product, so as not to highlight the variation of agricultural practices in Japanese localities<sup>146</sup>. In contrast, China's failure to have its national cuisine recognized under the ICH label may therefore reside in the fact it presented its culinary heritage from a very practical perspective, emphasizing the prestige of its heritage without properly showing how it connected Chinese people on a cultural level<sup>147</sup>. On the contrary, it might have underlined the difference in agricultural practices and food consumption habits present in the eight regions part of the "eight major cuisines". Such arguments defy the goals of the UNESCO Convention as they do not show

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<sup>140</sup> op. cit. "Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine's Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status."

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, "the eight major cuisines" being Anhui, Cantonese, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang cuisines.

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> op.cit. "Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose up at Chinese Food."

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> op. cit. "Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine's Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status."

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> op.cit. "Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose up at Chinese Food."

the socio-cultural value behind the preservation of these culinary traditions and fail to highlight how they take part in the construction of a common Chinese cultural identity<sup>148</sup>.

These repetitive rejections drove China to acquire quite a bad reputation in its pursuit of international recognition. Indeed, its relentless quest for the ICH label led people to believe that the CCP was trying to use UNESCO's protection as a "publicity stunt" to boost its export and its tourism industries<sup>149</sup>. Furthermore, the UNESCO jury panel is very strict with ICH applications which are motivated by marketing purposes. The perception of the ICH label as a potential business aid sometimes leads state actors to finance cultural projects with no real grassroots involvement. These projects defy UNESCO's intentions, as the ICH label would not protect endangered practices and traditions, and thus would not benefit local communities anymore<sup>150</sup>. It is therefore essential that China redefine its culinary heritage in a way that fits the UNESCO agenda in order to be able to promote an image of its national culinary identity which is marketable to the rest of the world.

- The "kimchi wars"

UNESCO is not the only platform China tried to use in order to define and promote its culinary identity. Indeed, it also attempted to assert national claims on culinary traditions through its bilateral trade relations with South Korea. South Korea and China possess a traditional dish made out of spicy fermented cabbage, named *kimchi* in South Korea and *pao cai* in China. In 2005, disputes arose in South Korea as the country entered into a *kimchi* trade deficit with China, a deficit which exceeded 1 million dollars in 2010<sup>151</sup>. This diplomatic dispute was coined by *The Economist* as the "kimchi wars"<sup>152</sup>.

As a matter of fact, *kimchi* has been promoted in South Korea as "the soul of Korean cuisine" since the late twentieth century, and it is considered as the national dish in the collective mind<sup>153</sup>. These gastronationalist claims have led to significant state intervention in the production and promotion of *kimchi* in order to protect it as a cultural good. Therefore, the apparition of the *kimchi* trade deficit with China in 2005 was immediately considered as a

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<sup>148</sup> op. cit. "Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine's Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status."

<sup>149</sup> op.cit. "Why UNESCO Should Turn Its Nose up at Chinese Food."

<sup>150</sup> op. cit. "Culinary Tensions: Chinese Cuisine's Rocky Road toward International Intangible Cultural Heritage Status."

<sup>151</sup> op. cit. "Taking Cultural Goods Seriously: Geographical Indications and the Renegotiation Strategies for the Korea-EU FTA."

<sup>152</sup> "Asia: The Kimchi Wars; South Korea." *The Economist*, Nov 19, 2005.

<sup>153</sup> op. cit. "Chapter Six: National Food in the International Context II—Gastronationalism and Populism"

threat by the South Korean government<sup>154</sup>. First, it highlighted an economic loss for the country, as it had a negative impact on the local *kimchi* industry<sup>155</sup>. Moreover, Chinese *kimchi* was perceived as a threat to South Korean culinary heritage as well as to its national brand image<sup>156</sup>. Indeed, it was very difficult for South Korea to build a strong culinary narrative based on *kimchi* as the national dish when most *kimchi* consumed in South Korea was imported from China or Japan<sup>157</sup>. However, in 2005, the Korea Food and Drug Administration (FDA) claimed that parasite eggs had been found in the cabbage used for the preparation of Chinese *kimchi* exported to South Korea, and therefore banned Chinese *kimchi* imports.

The “kimchi wars” coincide with the wish from the South Korean government to claim *kimchi* as purely South Korean. This is why, in 2013, South Korea nominated *kimjang* (the traditional way of making *kimchi*) at the UNESCO List of ICH, in the hopes that granting *kimjang* (and indirectly *kimchi*) international recognition would give more legitimacy to its claims against China. Indeed, as *kimchi* is seen as being at the core of South Korean culinary heritage, the Korean government claimed that China using the term *kimchi* to market *pao cai* was an act of cultural appropriation and should be punished by the international law<sup>158</sup>. It claimed that *kimchi* was unique, and that Chinese *pao cai* was too industrialized to be compared to Korean *kimchi*<sup>159</sup>. The South Korean strategy to protect the term *kimchi* aimed at underlining the specific quality and standards of *kimchi*, which were not reached by other dishes composed of fermented cabbage in East Asia.

As a response, China first restricted South Korean exports of *kimchi* to China<sup>160</sup>, thus refusing South Korean claims. In 2015, it signed a free-trade agreement with South Korea without any GI provision<sup>161</sup>, implying that no common ground could be found on the matter of differentiating *kimchi* from *pao cai*. Finally, in 2020, China’s request for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) certification for *pao cai* created an uproar on the international scene. Even though the ISO certification for *pao cai* was declared by the ISO

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Sharma, Shweta. “Cabbage wars: South Korean anger after China claims kimchi as its own.” *The Independent*. December 1, 2020.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

“not applicable to *kimchi*”<sup>162</sup>, *The Global Times* announced the *pao cai* to be “the new standardization for *kimchi*”<sup>163</sup>. This scandal led to fragile diplomatic relations between China and South Korea, notably regarding agrifood trade.

Therefore, joining the East Asian race to gastronationalist claims-making is more complex than China might have planned. Touching upon South Korea’s sovereignty over *kimchi* already brought up media attention, making bad press for China. This example shows that, in a globalized world, the authenticity of national foodways can be challenged and contested, which in turn might threaten the prosperity of involved national brand images<sup>164</sup>. If China wishes for its national culinary heritage to not be undermined by its neighbors’ claims, it is essential that it distinguishes the uniqueness of its traditional foodways, so as to prevent international controversies and bilateral disputes from tarnishing its culinary soft power.

To sum up, China’s attempt at gastrodiploamacy has suffered many failures, as its national brand image has been stained by the repetitive refusals of UNESCO to recognize its national cuisine as ICH, but also by its diplomatic dispute with South Korea regarding the differentiation between *kimchi* and *pao cai*. China’s next move might reside in the potential behind the EU-China GI Agreement ratified in 2020, even though China does not have the first-mover advantage in this field either.

#### **b. The potential behind EU-China relations regarding food heritagization**

In October 2022, the China-EU Agreement on Cooperation and Protection of Geographical Indications (also referred to as the EU-China GI Agreement) entered into force, marking the mutual protection of 275 GI products in both China and the EU<sup>165</sup>. This agreement is “China’s first comprehensive and high-level agreement on geographical indications (GI) negotiated and signed with a foreign party”<sup>166</sup>. For the EU, it is however the third time signing a bilateral agreement comprising the mutual recognition and protection of GIs with an East Asian country. Indeed, the EU signed in 2011 the EU-Korea Free Trade

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<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> McCurry, Justin. “‘Stealing Our Culture’: South Koreans Upset after China Claims Kimchi as Its Own.” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/01/stealing-our-culture-south-koreans-upset-after-china-claims-kimchi-as-its-own>.

<sup>164</sup> *op. cit.* “Chapter Six: National Food in the International Context II—Gastronationalism and Populism”

<sup>165</sup> European Union. “AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON COOPERATION ON, AND PROTECTION OF, GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS.” Official Journal of the European Union, December 4, 2020.

<sup>166</sup> CNIPA. “China-EU GI Agreement Begins to Pay Dividends.” China National Intellectual Property Administration, December 23, 2022.

Agreement (also called KOREU)<sup>167</sup>, and in 2019 the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, both agreements protecting more than 200 GIs of each party<sup>168</sup>. T. Walravens already refers to the EU-China GI Agreement as “a negotiation tool, a policy export and a gastronationalist cultural identity marker” for the EU<sup>169</sup>, nevertheless it has the potential to become a culinary identity marker for China as well.

In order to better understand the Chinese claims-making strategy behind the ratification of the EU-China GI Agreement, we can compare the GI provisions of the three different bilateral agreements that the EU negotiated with East Asian countries. In 2011, the EU signed the KOREU with South Korea. S. Park perceives in this agreement’s GI provisions an opportunity for South Korea to protect its ginseng industry, as the Korean ginseng export market is the most successful out of all the competitors on the global ginseng market<sup>170</sup>. As a matter of fact, the KOREU was especially efficient in differentiating the Korean ginseng from the Chinese one. Since 2014, China has stopped the registration of certification marks for Korean ginseng, claiming that it can also be produced in China. In this regard, the KOREU helped South Korea obtain foreign recognition for its ginseng products to counteract China’s decision and assert the high-level standards of Korean ginseng. According to S. Park, renegotiating the list of GI products in the KOREU would allow South Korea to go further in its wish to distinguish its culinary heritage from Chinese and Japanese competitors, notably to protect *kimchi* from being overlapped by *pao cai*<sup>171</sup>. Moreover, in 2019, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement established GI provisions between the EU and Japan, providing Japan with numerous opportunities in the field of culinary politics. Japan’s decision to include two of its persimmon products (namely *Ichida gaki* and *Notoshida korogaki*) as GI items in this agreement revealed its wish to “assert Japanese kakis as the original Asian persimmon products” in Western markets and minds<sup>172</sup>. With this decision, the Japanese government aims not only at preserving the traditional techniques employed in the production of persimmon, but also to assert its persimmon products as high-quality foodstuff in order to distinguish it from other products which might appear to the eye of the Western consumer but

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<sup>167</sup> European Commission. “New Geographical Indications Added to the EU-Korea Trade Agreement.” European Commission, November 30, 2022.

<sup>168</sup> EU Business in Japan. “EPA & Geographical Indications.” EU-Japan Centre for Industrial Cooperation. <https://www.eu-japan.eu/eubusinessinjapan/procedures/economic-partnership-agreement/epa-geographical-indications>

<sup>169</sup> op. cit. “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronationalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”

<sup>170</sup> taking cultural goods seriously

<sup>171</sup>

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*

do not originate from Japan<sup>173</sup>. While both Japan and South Korea have a protectionist attitude in their gastronationalist efforts with the EU, China rather aims at shaping its national culinary identity by obtaining European recognition for the symbols of its national culinary heritage. Indeed, most GI products protected by the EU-China GI Agreement are raw agricultural products (meat, mushroom, ginger), which are part of Chinese traditional cuisine<sup>174</sup>. We can maybe see there a way for China to boost its culinary image by furthering “the access to authentic local ingredients for culinary outpost restaurants”<sup>175</sup> in Europe. Other GI products included in the agreement are high-quality products such as renowned tea<sup>176</sup> and alcoholic drinks<sup>177</sup>. Walraven supposes that with the EU-China GI Agreement, China’s strategy is to “raise awareness and visibility of Chinese high-quality produce” in order to offset “food-related trust issues”<sup>178</sup>. Indeed, as explained previously, South Korean food safety claims against Chinese *pao cai* have tarnished its culinary brand image. Therefore, establishing a national culinary identity with high-standard GI products on Western markets would allow China to recover from previous accusations and to enhance its national brand image on the international scene<sup>179</sup>.

Moreover, this claims-making strategy is coupled with gastrodipomatic efforts at the state level, such as the promotion of Sichuan hotpot as an emblem of Chinese national culinary heritage.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, the UNESCO title “City of Gastronomy” was attributed to Chengdu in 2011, allowing Chinese state actors to spread an attractive Chinese culinary image through the globalization of the “Sichuan brand”<sup>181</sup>. Many initiatives were taken at the state level not only to directly promote the Sichuan cuisine, but also to encourage private actors from doing so themselves. For instance, in 2018, the “Hotpot Culture Month” aimed at promoting the Sichuan hot pot industry inscribed itself in an effort to boost cultural tourism

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<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *op. cit.* “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronationalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> see European Union. “AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON COOPERATION ON, AND PROTECTION OF, GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS.” Official Journal of the European Union, December 4, 2020. Annex V : for example, Jingshan Tea, Qintang Mai Jian Tea, Wuzhishan Black Tea; etc.

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.* for example : Yanghe Daqu Liquor, Gujing Gongjiu Liquor, Xiaogan Rice Wine, etc.

<sup>178</sup> *op. cit.* “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronationalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”

<sup>179</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *op. cit.* “Asian Food and Culinary Politics: Food Governance, Constructed Heritage and Contested Boundaries.”

<sup>181</sup> James I. McDougall (2021) Globalization of Sichuan hot pot in the “new era”, *Asian Anthropology*, 20:1, 77-92, DOI: 10.1080/1683478X.2020.1779970



domestically<sup>182</sup>. However, the Chinese government quickly moved from financing the domestic promotion of Sichuan cuisine to gastrodipomatic strategies appealing at foreign audiences. “The Three-year Action Plan for Sichuan Cuisine to Go Global (2018-2020)” published by Sichuansheng Renmin Zhengfu Bangongting in 2018 outlined the globalization process of Sichuan cuisine in four steps<sup>183</sup>. First, it encouraged the creation of an international hot pot association, which became the Sichuan province Hotpot Association. This association notably takes part in the organization of the annual Shanghai International Hotpot Innovation Trade Fair, in collaboration with the CCA<sup>184</sup>. Besides, through the Three-Year Plan, state actors granted funding for industries involved in the production of hotpot and looking to “expand globally”<sup>185</sup>. It also launched the financing of awards dedicated to companies boosting the hotpot industry through innovation, quality improvement or even brand recognition<sup>186</sup>. Finally, the “Go Global” strategy helped set up overseas offices aiming at promoting Sichuan cuisines abroad through state-to-public engagement<sup>187</sup>. This initiative allowed for state actors to work on a new culinary narrative by spreading the Sichuan hotpot story through the funding of tourism, media, and education outlets<sup>188</sup>, therefore reshaping the Chinese culinary identity in a more appealing appearance for foreign audiences.

Therefore, by signing the EU-China GI Agreement, China has granted itself the opportunity to define and promote its national culinary heritage in a way that attracts the European public. Indeed, even though China is not the first East Asian country to conclude an agreement with the EU for gastronationalist purposes<sup>189</sup>, the inclusion of high-quality origin-linked products in its GI list allows it to reshape its culinary identity around a prestigious image of its cuisine. Besides, this initiative is coupled in China with direct state involvement in the cuisine industry, in an attempt to globalize Chinese emblematic cuisines and thus, to share the Chinese flavors with the global audience.

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<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> SHCE. “Introduction: China Hotpot Industry Development Conference.” Shanghai International Hotpot Industry Exhibition, 2023. <http://www.hotpotexpo.com/en/Exhibition/Introduction>.

<sup>185</sup> *op. cit.* “Globalization of Sichuan hot pot in the “new era””

<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *op. cit.* “What’s in a Name? The Role of Gastronationalism in the Recent EU-China Agreement on Geographical Indications”

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, China is on the path to develop a strong national culinary narrative that will help it overcome the diplomatic failures it faced these last two decades in the field of culinary politics. The EU-China GI Agreement marks a new beginning in China's gastronationalist efforts, providing the CCP with a new platform to define its national culinary heritage and therefore compete with its neighbors in the race to gastronationalist claims-making in East Asia. This agreement also has the potential to help China overcome its past gastrodipomatic failures by renewing its national brand image, which got mainly tarnished by the persistent bilateral dispute with South Korea regarding the "kimchi wars". Indeed, the EU-China GI agreement allows China to get foreign recognition for the most emblematic Chinese foodways by asserting the protection of the respective GI products. China is currently aiming for the promotion of a high-quality culinary heritage through this agreement, a strategy which might open the door for an improved national culinary identity more likely to appeal foreign audiences.

Nevertheless, if China truly wishes to obtain international recognition for its national cuisine, as it asserted previously through the applications for the UNESCO List of ICH, it is compulsory that state actors as well as the CCA reconsider their strategy in the field of cultural diplomacy. As a matter of fact, China still has to perfect its rhetoric in order to convince UNESCO that Chinese culinary heritage embodies socio-cultural values that are worth being preserved at the international level. As previous Chinese endeavors to UNESCO have been perceived as bad attempts to obtain a "publicity stunt", it is very important that concerned actors redefine the Chinese national culinary narrative from a perspective that is more understanding of UNESCO's terms and criteria.

Such a strategy would require state actors to deal with internal limitations. It is indeed very complex to base China's national culinary narrative on common culinary experiences when the nation itself possesses such a large array of culinary traditions spread across the territory. This difficulty is already underlined by China's attempt to categorize its national cuisine into "eight major cuisines".

Finally, a successful nation branding strategy based on comprehensive gastronationalist efforts would not only help China sweep its past failures under the carpet, but it would also allow it to reach the goals expressed in the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for

the Protection and Utilization of Geographical Indications issued on January 21, 2022<sup>190</sup>. Indeed, by combining the development of a national brand image with the reshaping of an attractive national culinary heritage, China would succeed in enhancing the brand value and influence of its GIs, therefore gaining in “culinary soft power”<sup>191</sup>.

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<sup>190</sup> McDonald, Garrett, and Adam Branson. “Geographic Indications Five-Year Plan Issued.” USDA, March 14, 2022.

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, see paragraph 12.

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