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Korean Tacos and Kimchi Diplomacy [1]

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“Food is our common ground, a universal experience.”
- James Beard

South Korea has recently launched a serious re-branding effort. The South Korean government has been worried that the country’s brand has been underperforming in years past, and not at the level befitting a country that is the solid middle power that South Korea believes itself to be. There was consternation at the fact that Korean brands had better awareness recognition than the country, or that often, when recognized, Korean brands were mistaken for Japanese models.

Seoul has held public diplomacy commissions and brought in the experts to discuss how to raise awareness of Korea in the international community. The government tried various slogans with the appropriate buzzwords that never exactly connected or meant anything (‘Sparkling'? 'Be Inspired'? Really?).

One area that the Korean government has recently chosen as a target for outreach is the realm of gastrodiplomacy. Gastrodiplomacy, simply put, is the act of winning hearts and minds through stomachs. The technique of gastrodiplomacy was perfected by Thailand as it used its kitchens and restaurants as outposts of cultural diplomacy. Given the growing popularity of Thai restaurants around the globe the government of Thailand implemented the “Global Thai program” in 2002 as a means to increase the number of Thai restaurants worldwide.

The Thai government’s rationale, The Economist noted" target="_blank">*The Economist* noted , was that the boom in restaurants would, “ not only introduce delicious spicy Thai food to thousands of new tummies and persuade more people to visit Thailand, but it could subtly help deepen relations with other countries.”

More recently, the Los Angeles dining scene has been abuzz with Korean-Mexican fusion cuisine. The Kogi Taco Truck, which sends out its location via Twitter and features Korean-Mexican fusion fare, has become a veritable cult phenomenon on the LA dining scene. When it first opened, lines snaked for up to two hours, as hungry diners waited to eat barbecued beef tacos slathered in Korean “salsa roja,” and topped with cilantro, onions, cabbage slaw and soy-sesame chili. The *Los Angeles Times* commented on the popularity, “perhaps it’s the exquisite cultural co-mingling inherent in the food that draws the crowds; the only-in-LA combination of two of the city’s most beloved ethnic cuisines.”

According to Kogi owner Roy Choi, the idea, “was to bring his ethnic background together with the sensibility and geography of Los Angeles, where Koreatown abuts Latin-dominated neighborhoods in midcity, and where food cultures have long merged. Former Mexican restaurants, now Korean, serve burritos, and Mexican workers populate the kitchens of

Korean restaurants." The popularity of Kogi and Korean-Mexican fusion food has led to a mushrooming of Korean taco trucks getting involved in the act, although Kogi is still the best (in my opinion). Korean taco trucks have now also begun to pop up in New York.

Moreover, other ethnic foods are also pushing fusion cuisine like the delicious Indian-Mexican tikka tacos and chicken masala quesadillas available at 23rd Street Café near USC, Japanese tacos found in Little Tokyo and Chinese tacos from Don Chow's (the ginger lime-marinated tofu tacos are incredible). Most recently, I found a Mexi-terranean taco truck called Kabob Express that served shwarma tacos.

The point of this blog is not to cause hunger pangs, but to point out one of the most serious and central components of Public Diplomacy: listening. When public diplomacy actors pay attention to local and global public opinion rather than gluttonously engaging in advocacy, they are more adept at taking advantage of unorthodox openings created by authentic cultural innovations to carry out enhanced public diplomacy.

At present, the preponderance of various fusion food trucks led to an LA Street Food Festival. It would have been a wise PD investment for the Korean Consulate of Los Angeles to help sponsor such an event, or try to push something similar. For all that Korea is spending trying to rebrand itself and push Korean gastrodiplomacy, it would be better served listening and looking for examples of organic, authentic and homegrown outlets of cultural gastrodiplomacy like the Korean taco truck. My advice is not free, mind you - the Korean Consulate may kindly pay my consulting fees in the form of bulgogi tacos covered in kimchi.

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