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Bubble Tea Fever: How HeyTea and Bao Group are Leveraging Soft Power in Paris ^[1]

On the Eve of Bastille Day in France, a two-hour line took shape on the corner of a street in the 11th arrondissement. Yet, people were not queuing for French celebrations but for a very specific item that Chinese brands have successfully exported across the globe: bubble tea. Thanks to a [deal](#) by “Le Guide Ultime” – a French social media account on Instagram – the lucky 300 first people to enter the HeyTea pop-up were promised a free beverage.

Originating in [Taiwan](#) in 1986, bubble tea quickly spread to the Mainland and became a staple of Chinese households. Bubble teas crowd the [aisles of shops](#) in China, with more than a [dozen](#) brands fighting for market space. Now, with bubble tea, China is finally accomplishing what its neighbor South Korea successfully achieved with K-pop and K-drama: reaching a global audience. Previously lacking the same internationalization as the South Korean movie or music industries, China struggled to export products that are appealing, fashionable, and trendy. China is now turning to gastrodiploamacy – the practice of “sharing a state’s cultural heritage through cuisine,” as defined by Fatin Mahirah Solleh in “[Gastrodiploamacy as a Soft Power Tool to Enhance Nation Brand](#)” .”

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The goal of gastrodiploamacy is to use food to connect societies and achieve a global branding process (Wajeana White, Albert A. Barreda, and Stephanie Hein, “Gastrodiploamacy: Captivating a Global Audience Through Cultural Cuisine-A Systematic Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Tourismology* 5, no. 2. November 18, 2019: 127–44) While Chinese food has long been a staple of the ordering-in rotation, bubble tea in particular is reaching a new demographic. By promoting popular and trendy food items, China aims to create a positive cultural connection that resonates with global youth. Most bubble tea drinkers are, in fact, between ages [18 and 30 years old](#) and a CLSA [study](#) reported in July 2021 that 94% of people surveyed between 20 and 29 had purchased a bubble tea within the past three months. In other words, HeyTea is the latest craze among young people.

As China tries to encourage tourism from European countries (take, for example the visa-free entry extended to different [EU passport holders](#) until 2025), Chinese firms are meanwhile trying to make a name in Europe. HeyTea’s first pop-up in the European market demonstrates the power of bubble tea fever. However, HeyTea is by no means a first-mover. In fact, it enters an overcrowded market, as bubble tea beverages spike in popularity across France. Yet, the firm successfully and strategically positioned itself as a high-end chain in China; HeyTea is indeed considered fancier than chains like Mixue and Coco, which already boast

locations in Paris. The French capital is renowned for its luxury and refinement, and HeyTea aims to tap into that reputation.

Beyond making sense for HeyTea to start in the EU market in France, the bubble tea company is able to position itself on a premium product offering thanks to its partnership with the trendy and already-appreciated Chinese restaurant group Bao Family in Paris. The collaboration is the perfect way to extend cultural diplomacy and soft power in a city that revolves around high-end commodities. The Chinese themselves love to consume those goods; the Chinese luxury fashion and leather goods market even grew in Q4 2023 by 30%, reported LVMH. Bao Family is an already important group of restaurants in France with four different locations in Paris and one in the city of Marseille. Rising in popularity, the group offers what many Parisians prefer: relatively cheap yet tasty and trendy food with a tasteful ambiance and surprising menu in the heart of a lively neighborhood.

The collaboration with the Parisian hit group Bao Family enables HeyTea to expand into a new market and mix its products with a different culture. From exclusive products to a co-branded dessert mixing Baos with brown sugar boba, the Chinese firm hopes to gain exposure and new customers. HeyTea is also introducing its iconic beverages sold in China such as its original Supreme Brown Sugar Boba Milk, along with different offerings of smoothies with jelly and Bobba pearls ranging from Grape to Mango Grapefruit, or—for the French cheese enthusiasts—the Cheese Green Tea.

The creation of the HeyTea pop-up at Bao Express directly plays into food diplomacy for China, as the firm is able to position bubble tea as a trendy, high-end product that warrants standing in line. This strategic move seeks to highlight the cultural export of a beloved Chinese beverage, transforming it into a symbol of sophistication and modernity and crafting a similar image of the country on the global stage. In addition, the food services industry is highly efficient in China: ordering a bubble tea takes approximately two minutes on your phone from placing your order on the mini-program to paying directly through the app; and a message is directly sent to your phone when your drink is ready. We could imagine that firms' ability to cater to fast-paced lifestyles might appeal to French consumers. The convenience of the Chinese model and the high-end technologies used by restaurants and chains are also appealing to smartphone-dependent youth. Brands like HeyTea, in short, are finding success in building a positive image of China, one that is trendy and relevant.
