

Use Food as City Image

--Take Luosifen as an Example of City Branding

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Abstract: Self-branding has emerged as a prevalent strategy among cities, leveraging food as a critical image enhancer. Cities, particularly in China, promote their food culture to broaden recognition and evoke interest, as food often highly condenses and succinctly expresses the identity, culture, and social customs of a city. Food's ingredients, styles, and tastes are shaped by local natural factors, inadvertently conveying a city's environmental characteristics. It also mirrors residents' life philosophy and regional traits, which is evident in Northeast China's hearty cuisine adapted to cold climates. Globally, food is seen as a carrier of city and culture, as exemplified by France's high-quality cuisine representing national identity. Thus, utilizing food as a city representative is logical. This essay explores Guangxi Province's case, specifically the Luosifen, as an urban food ambassador, analyzing its implementation and feasibility in projecting the city's image.

Keywords: City Branding, Food Culture, City Image, Touristic Terroir, Gastronomy Tourism.

1. Introduction

In China, when it comes to the connection between food and the city, one cannot fail to mention the food, the Luosifen (river snail rice noodles) of Guangxi province, which food has been very popular in recent years. The first important thing is the city that the cuisine relies on and represents—Guangxi.

Guangxi is located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southern China. Most of the area is made up of hilly areas with an altitude of 1,500 to 3,000 feet (450 to 900 meters). In the west, Duyang Mountain is about 6,500 feet (2,000 meters) high. In the southeast, the lowlands are located between 300 and 1,500 feet (90 to 450 meters) in height. Throughout the region, the temperature is warm enough to ensure agricultural production throughout the year. Summer lasts from April to October, and the summer is hot and humid. The temperature in July is between 27 and 32°C (80 to 90°F), the winter is mild, and the temperature in January is between 40 and 60°F (4 to 16°C).[1]

The terrain and climatic conditions have created the eating habits of the Guangxi people, that is, rice is the main food, and the Guangxi people also use rice as the raw material to produce food with various shapes, tastes and cooking methods. In addition, because Guangxi has a special karst landform, its tourism industry accounts for a large proportion of the regional economy.

As for the Luosifen, it is famous for its pungent smell and taste. The Luosifen stock is made by boiling river snails and pork or beef bones, stewing them for hours with cassia bark, licorice root, black cardamom, star anise, fennel seeds, dried tangerine peel, cloves, sand ginger, white pepper and

bay leaf. The snail meat disintegrates completely, merging with the stock after the long boiling process. The noodles are served with peanuts, pickled bamboo shoots and green beans, shredded black fungus, bean curd sheets, and green vegetables.[2] The Luosifen embodies the essence of Guangxi cuisine—the combination of sour and spicy. Guangxi's preference for spicy cuisine, distinct from the renowned Sichuan hot pot, underscores the diverse culinary traditions within China, despite a shared appreciation for piquant flavors. This regional difference may be attributed to varying environmental factors, such as the high humidity common in both locales. It is believed that consuming spicy dishes can serve as a counterbalance to the effects of ambient moisture on the body, offering a potential explanation for the popularity of such fare in these regions.

2. The establishment of the city's food image

The local government attaches great importance to the development of food tourism and plans specific Blocks for the development of special tourism.

Yangshuo County government invited China's best planners and architects to make plans for tourism infrastructure and scenic areas. By the end of 2004, Yangshuo had completed 54 projects, with an investment totaling 1.3 billion RMB.[3]

This is just the tourism planning and investment that Guangxi Province has made for Yangshuo County in its region, which shows that Guangxi Province attaches great importance to tourism. When a city realizes to build its own tourism industry, then 'touristic terroir' is a concept that can be entered. This term comes from France and it is defined as 'a unique combination of nature, culture and natural environment, thus giving each region a unique tourist attraction'. In other words, when a city develops itself into a tourist city, natural scenery should not be the only focus of 'tourism', and there is another point that should not be ignored, that is, social culture. Obviously, compared with scenic spots, social culture is a relatively abstract factor. It has no concrete form, but it can be presented in many ways. Among these many aspects, the food experience is a way of presentation that is tangible and makes it easy for visitors to have a sense of actual experience. Dining at a restaurant is often described as the most frequent leisure activity for travelers and the second largest daily expenditure,[4] which also reflects the importance of food as a necessity in people's lives. For a city developing tourism, this is undoubtedly a strong signal directly related to economic income.

Establish a small town of the Luosifen and a museum of this food culture to attract tourists. The Luosifen Town is located in Liuzhou City, Guangxi Province, with a total planned area of 22.75 square kilometers. The town is divided into four different functional areas, the ecological leisure area (Liu river to the east and vegetation-rich mountains to the west with fresh air, suitable for leisure and vacation), residential areas (the living settlements of nearby residents), Luosifen industrial research zone (mainly for the research, development and production, also for the production of cultural and creative products) and the core cultural leisure area, a comprehensive area with commercial leisure as its main function.[5] The terms 'gastronomy tourism' may start out with green tourism activities, which basically reflect the development model of the Guangxi Luosifen town.[6] Such an industrial park not only provides an opportunity for foreign tourists to learn more about Guangxi culture, but also a creative leisure area for local residents, making the Luosifen popular as a regional brand.

Holding celebrations in public spaces, just like the two-week Independent Coffee Festival in Totnes,[7] Liuzhou City, Guangxi Province also holds the annual Luosifen Town Cultural Festival, but it is to highlight the importance of snail noodles to Guangxi, and to enhance the confidence of the local residents and practitioners in the food culture, instead of countering the threat of external food brands.

3. The unique advantage of using local cuisine as a sign for urban development

‘Gastronomic experiences for tourists are usually developed from the perspective of ‘unique’ aspects of the gastronomy that can only be found in that particular location... If gastronomy can be linked to specific countries or regions, it becomes a powerful tourism marketing tool. Authenticity has always been viewed as an important aspect of tourism consumption, and seeking out ‘authentic’ local and regional foods can become a motive for visiting a particular destination.’[8] When thinking of a well-known food, people often immediately think of a place that is very related to the food. For example, pizza and Italy, sushi and Japan, hot pot and China, or people who are more familiar with Chinese culture will directly think of Sichuan Province in China. Therefore, when the food of a city has outstanding characteristics, it is more necessary to amplify the role of the food and to establish a unique connection between the food and the region. Facts have proved that it is feasible to connect the food to a specific city, as this is a subtle phenomenon in our daily life.

Food tourism as a means of extending the tourist season.[9] Most of China's regional specialties, such as Guangxi snail noodles, Sichuan hot pot, and Beijing roast duck, can be served all year round. Therefore, food tourism makes travel independent of seasonal factors. In addition, because different seasons produce different seasonal foods, food tourism can also increase the freshness by adding different seasonal foods as side dishes, which is also conducive to increasing the frequency of tourists' travel.

When the term ‘Gastronomy Tourism’ is conceptualized, it can be interpreted as experiencing other cultures through food.[10] In another word, people can experience a city that carries another culture through food. Then food tourism can be free of location restrictions, so that tourism is not limited to being a form that must spend time to travel to another city to experience culture. In the current relatively fast-paced life, when people do not have the time or money to travel on the ground, people can buy the fast-food version of this delicacy through the Internet, and taste the deliciousness through simple cooking. In this way, city marketing can still be carried out.

As ‘eating out’ has become popularized, so distinctions between class factions have had to be underlined in ways other than simply visiting restaurants. Today it is essential to visit the ‘right’ restaurant – the hip, happening place. To be caught in a restaurant that has fallen out of favor with one’s peers can be social death...as the masses attempt to emulate the consumption patterns of higher classes, who in turn seek to maintain their distinctiveness by finding new areas of culinary exclusivity.[8]

In people’s daily life, such a comparison mode of dining out often appears, but obviously, whether it brings people a sense of superiority or inferiority, it is a feeling that will not be comfortable in the long run because it is an unnatural state of being trapped.

When the food that people eat frequently in life is used as the famous image of the city, its existence will relieve the tension brought by class consciousness to a certain extent, as people can enjoy this food without burden. It is well-known, very popular, and more affordable for everyone. This kind of food is a good choice when dining out, which can blur this uncomfortable sense of class. Consequently, the cultivation of a specific food image serves to foster a shared, accessible source of pleasure. In the context of dining out, this collective culinary identity can engender a sense of comfort among urban dwellers, thereby mitigating feelings of stress and anxiety that may arise from the pressures of city life.

At the same time, the famous food also makes the people proud of the local food culture. As the late French President Charles de Gaulle often said: ‘Who can manage 246 kinds of cheese to manage a country?’[11] This sentence ignores the president's boasting of his political achievements during his administration. From another perspective, it can be seen that the richness of this national food culture and the emotions that people are proud of this feature.

4. Cities gain benefits from food cultural economization

When people talk about delicious food, they often think of the tertiary industry first, about catering retail and services. But for some Chinese cities with outstanding food culture, they not only focus on the practice and supervision of the tertiary industry, instead, they are also working hard to change the focus of Luosifen-related affairs from the tertiary industry to the secondary industry, under the guidance and support of the government, making the Luosifen an important project to help the overall economic development of the city, so as to achieve a win-win situation for the enterprise and the city. In other words, in addition to the retail revenue brought by the tourism industry, many gourmet cities in China have begun to focus on the fast food product market. For example, Guangxi has already targeted the Luosifen market in the form of bagged fast food. Make the cities develop new models to occupy a broader food market in the era of rapid Internet development.

Luosifen, as a noodles with special soup, naturally have the characteristics of being difficult to carry and having the best taste period, which is short. Therefore, to overcome this weakness, it is necessary to learn from the experience of similar instant noodle products on the market. For diners, in addition to meeting their dietary requirements, the significant point should be whether they can ‘reproduce’ the good eating experience. To achieve this, two factors are very important. The first is to be able to imitate the best eating experience during tasting, in terms of this, bagged Luosifen achieves the separation of wet and dry ingredients. The second point is whether to enable customers to operate conveniently and taste the classic taste. Therefore, the bagged products choose to plasticize the ingredients in a semi-cooked state, so that they can be stored in a vacuum state and extend the shelf life. At the same time, detailed self-operation steps are printed on the outer packaging of the food, hoping to enable customers to get the best eating experience. Restore the taste in local restaurants to the greatest extent.

After the third industrial revolution, the Internet has changed people's lives in many ways. Chinese society, which has caught up with this wave, has also achieved development from multiple angles in recent years, including the emergence of online shopping platforms, the improvement of food preservation technology, the rapid development of the logistics industry, and the rich and diverse text sharing and video sharing on social platforms, etc. The consumer choice model of food choices shows that many factors such as politics, economy, culture, psychology and market influence will affect the choices made by consumers.[12] The signature foods of these cities, represented by the Luosifen, are most cleverly satisfied more than one factor.

For example, vlogs with the themes of ‘recording meal process’ and ‘get ready with me’ are both very popular video formats in Asia these years, when some bloggers with many followers shared the ease of operation of instant Luosifen and expressed their love for the taste of Luosifen in their videos, especially, after the followers in front of the screen saw the blogger enjoying a bowl of the Luosifen, many of them would be interested in this delicacy and even wanted to taste it by their own. Then people found on shopping websites that the price of each instant Luosifen was about £2, which was a price that most people can afford. Therefore, this made buying and tasting instant Luosifen a social trend. As a consumable item, its demand and sales were sustainable. In terms of the city, the name of Guangxi is bundled with the name of Luosifen. Guangxi province not only obtained the economic benefits of selling a large number of instant noodles, but also because of the publicity of the Luosifen, there were more people interested in taking On-site travel to experiences this place, both for its food culture and landscape culture.

While discussing the use of special cuisine as the image of the city for publicity, there is a crucial voice worth to think about. That is, when rethinking the concept of creative cities, there is a voice that people should be wary of creative cities, because it means discarding the local cultural, social and economic factors that the city had before the transformation of the creative city, to cater to the

so-called wealthy class who prefer creative things to transform the whole city. Just blind pursuit of becoming a more modern and upscale place will make the city lose its original distinctiveness, and conform itself to the usual machine-made city, which is nearly nothing different compared with the other modern cities around the world.[13] Although it has become a popular area for tourists, the business hours of the rice noodle shops on the urban streets of Guangxi still follow the eating habits of the locals. The rice noodle shops still open early every morning, so the residents who work and live around the block can eat their familiar delicious breakfast after 6 o'clock in the morning, which is worthy of recognition. The food court is open to tourists but is still part of the most common food culture of urban residents.

5. The future of creative city of gastronomy

In the UNESCO Creative City Network, there is a special category of creative cities featuring gastronomy. 'UNESCO provides a guiding list of characteristics to help those cities that are willing to work toward the standard required to become a Creative City of Gastronomy. These are: Well-developed gastronomy that is characteristic of the urban center and/ or region; Vibrant gastronomy community with numerous traditional restaurants and/ or chefs; Endogenous [from local environment] ingredients used in traditional cooking; Local know-how, traditional culinary practices, and methods of cooking that have survived industrial/ technological advancement; Traditional food markets and traditional food industry; Tradition of hosting gastronomic festivals, awards, contests, and other broadly targeted means of recognition; Respect for the environment and promotion of sustainable local products; Nurturing of public appreciation, promotion of nutrition in educational institutions, and inclusion of biodiversity conservation programs in cooking school curricula'[14].

With the corresponding standards, there will be specific development directions for these cities with iconic regional cuisine. In addition, due to UNESCO's recent efforts to increase the visibility of its 'Creative Cities' program, and now many cities are gradually attaching importance to food tourism in their economic development plans. It is expected that the number of recognized gourmet creative cities that meet specifications will continue to increase in the next few years.[15]

6. Conclusion

The development of creative cities featuring specific regional cuisine is now a very popular way of urban development in China. From the perspective of the city itself, this is mainly based on China's large land area, complex terrain, rich climate types, and differences between coastal and inland regions. Conditions lead to different types of food materials (major crops, commonly used vegetables, fruits, and meat), and different taste preferences (the daily dishes in central, western and southwestern China tend to be spicy, the taste of the south and southeast part of China is sweeter), the differences have also contributed to the unique food culture of different cities. When people's material conditions improve, diet is no longer just to eliminate hunger, but to be a way of leisure. As a result, individuals are increasingly willing to allocate greater financial resources towards their dietary preferences, and the rise of cities renowned for their culinary offerings can be seen as a reflection of regional economic prosperity. This trend is particularly relevant in the context of developing nations such as China, where it offers a promising blueprint for urban growth and revitalization centered around the promotion and celebration of distinctive local cuisines.

In the case of Guangxi Province using the Luosifen as a food business card for urban publicity, we can see that the establishment of the image of urban food cannot be separated from the support of the local government. And 'tourism terroir' is a concept that can be used for reference in the development of tourism. Through the establishment of landmark areas such as the Town of the Luosifen and the Luosifen Cultural Museum, the development concept of integrating natural culture and social culture

is practiced. As well as leisure competitions and celebrations held in urban public spaces, local people have a stronger sense of identity and pride in specific cuisines.

In addition, the development of the Internet is conducive to the expansion of the gourmet market. In the development of the fast food industry, the city will also develop the tertiary industry and the secondary industry together to realize the expansion of the city's income. As for food tourism itself, it is not limited by season and location, which also enables the marketing of cities to last longer and reach a wider range. Therefore, at least in China, it is a feasible urban marketing method.

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