

Flavours of Identity:

The Role of Taiwanese Cuisine in Shaping Cultural Narratives

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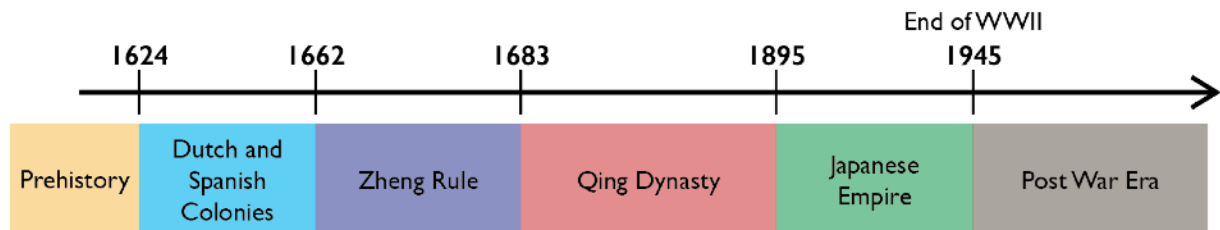
Introduction

Taiwanese cuisine represents more than mere nourishment; it embodies the complex narrative of Taiwan's identity—a narrative still being actively explored by its people. When queried about the quintessential Taiwanese dish, ten locals might offer ten distinct responses, illustrating the diversity and richness of the island's culinary heritage (袁, 2023). Central to Taiwanese cuisine is rice, a staple that exists in three varieties on the island: javanica, indica, and japonica. These grains, introduced by settlers and colonisers, have each played a pivotal role in the dietary foundations of Taiwanese households. Today, while short-grain japonica is predominantly consumed, the historical significance of each type reflects the evolving Taiwanese identity, symbolising the ongoing redefinition of what it means to be Taiwanese (Wei, 2023).

The history of Taiwan is marked by migration, colonisation, and a continuous search for identity, each era infusing new flavours into its culinary landscape. Indigenous tribes have imparted sustainable practices that persist in modern food culture, while successive waves of Chinese immigrants introduced varied regional cuisines. Additionally, Japanese rule, which lasted fifty years, has left a lasting impact on Taiwanese food. Understanding this layered history is essential not only for appreciating the cuisine itself but also for recognising how Taiwan's culinary traditions mirror its broader social and political evolution.

This essay asserts that Taiwanese cuisine serves as a vibrant conduit of the island's history and current societal dynamics. It highlights how local ingredients, such as rice and tea, and global favourites like bubble tea, articulate Taiwan's unique cultural identity. This distinctiveness is crucial in differentiating Taiwan from China, particularly through 'gastrodiplomacy'. By promoting its culinary heritage internationally, Taiwan leverages food as a medium to share its culture and assert its sovereignty, challenging reductive narratives shaped by geopolitical conflicts.

The discussion will delve into how historical events in Taiwan are reflected in its culinary practices and how these practices are intertwined with the island's cultural identity crisis, especially under the looming threats from the Chinese government. It will also examine the role of food in both domestic and international identity politics, focusing on modern Taiwanese cuisine and its creators. Ultimately, the essay will argue that Taiwanese cuisine transcends mere sustenance, acting as a bold statement of identity and a strategic tool in diplomacy.



Historical Context

In her influential book "Made in Taiwan," Clarissa Wei explores the rich tapestry of Taiwanese history through the lens of its diverse cuisine. Taiwan has been shaped by various cultural influences over millennia, starting with the Austronesian peoples who were the island's earliest known inhabitants. These indigenous groups have a deep-rooted history that is closely tied to the island's varied geography, which has influenced their unique culinary traditions. The Austronesian connection extends across a vast region from Madagascar to Hawaii, underscoring a shared heritage that manifests in both language and food.

Nestled deep within Taiwan's central mountains, fig vines intricately wind around the trunks of towering trees. Several times annually, indigenous wasp bees intricately burrow into the figs to lay their eggs. These figs are then naturally pollinated by the deceased maternal wasps, causing the fruits to swell until they reach maturity. At this stage, the Tsou tribe's men gather the ripe figs and transport them home. The seeds are meticulously extracted, dried, and then mixed with water to create aiyu jelly—a delightful, amber-coloured dessert that remains a beloved summer treat in Taiwan. This jelly is commonly served with shaved ice, a dish that also features taro and sweet potato—crops with a profound indigenous history, introduced by early Polynesians. The layers of history encapsulated in a simple bowl of shaved ice highlight the rich cultural tapestry of Taiwan.

The 15th century marked the beginning of European exploration, bringing the Dutch to Taiwan in 1624. This period introduced new agricultural practices and crops such as sugarcane and rice, significantly influencing the local food landscape. The Dutch also facilitated the migration of Han Chinese farmers from Fujian and Guangdong, who brought their culinary traditions to the island, further enriching its gastronomic heritage.

All types of tea originate from the same species, *Camellia sinensis*. The distinct processing methods applied to the leaves are what differentiate the various categories of tea. Among these, Taiwan is renowned for its oolong teas, which are partially oxidised and typically shaped into tightly rolled balls resembling pill bugs. While native subspecies of *Camellia sinensis* exist on the island, the Taiwanese tea industry initially flourished as an export-oriented venture, relying on varieties imported from Fujian province. Initially, the tea leaves harvested in Taiwan were sent to mainland China for processing and subsequent export. The industry transformed when a Scottish entrepreneur, John Dodd, and a Chinese businessman, Li Chungsheng (李春生), began locally processing the tea and exporting it directly from Taiwanese ports. This shift occurred after the Qing Dynasty opened Taiwan's ports to international trade in 1858, leading to the global recognition of Taiwanese tea under the brand "Formosa Oolong."

Following the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan by the Qing Dynasty without the Taiwanese populace's consent. The Japanese administration embarked on a campaign to modernise the island, with sugar playing a pivotal role as a symbol of luxury and sophistication. Given Japan's dependence on sugar imports, Taiwan's ideal subtropical climate was seen as an opportunity to develop a robust sugarcane industry to meet domestic needs. While sugarcane had been cultivated in Taiwan since the Dutch colonial period, the Japanese significantly advanced this agricultural sector. They established numerous state-of-the-art plantations and processing facilities, and by the dawn of the 20th century, sugarcane farming involved a third of all rural families in Taiwan. Sugar's role in Taiwanese cuisine was not only as a key ingredient but also as an emblem of status during this time. Although Japanese governance over Taiwan was brief, lasting only half a century, its influence profoundly shaped Taiwanese cuisine. The Japanese industrialised the production of fundamental ingredients such as soy sauce, rice vinegar, and rice wine, and these elements continue to be produced following Japanese methods to this day.

At the conclusion of World War II, the Republic of China assumed control over Taiwan, having governed much of China until that point. However, in 1949, they were overthrown by Communist forces, prompting the government and approximately one million soldiers and refugees to seek refuge in Taiwan. This influx introduced a variety of regional Chinese cuisines to the island, previously unseen and rich in diversity. Although these immigrants constituted only 10 to 15 percent of the overall population, they held significant cultural and political influence. This period is often where traditional perceptions of Taiwanese cuisine are anchored. Over time, however, the rich tapestry of regional Chinese dishes introduced during this era has transformed, with many dishes evolving significantly in both taste and composition, diverging distinctly from their original forms on the mainland.

Today, Taiwanese cuisine stands out for its diversity and complexity, drawing from its indigenous roots and the various cultural imprints left by foreign settlers and colonisers. It is a cuisine that tells the story of Taiwan's historical journey through flavours that resonate with the island's multifaceted cultural identity. As Taiwan continues to navigate its distinct political landscape, its cuisine remains a powerful expression of its unique heritage and a form of cultural self-determination.

Democracy and Identity

According to a 2023 survey by the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation, 78% of respondents identify solely as Taiwanese, a significant increase from 1991 when only 13.5% did so. In contrast, less than 10% now see themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese, compared to 73% in 1991. This shift in identity over 32 years suggests a deep transformation influenced by historical events, which may also shed light on the current challenges faced by the Taiwanese people.

At the conclusion of World War II, Taiwan came under the administration of the Republic of China (ROC), led by the Kuomintang (KMT). Initially, the majority of Taiwan's population, excluding the indigenous people, were hopeful about their new rulers due to shared cultural ties. However, optimism faded due to the KMT's authoritarian and corrupt practices, including the arbitrary confiscation of private property, economic mismanagement, and political exclusion. Tensions escalated into violence on February 27, 1947, when a government agent assaulted a Taiwanese widow for allegedly selling illegal cigarettes in Taipei. The situation worsened when an officer shot into a crowd of

onlookers, killing a man, which led to further clashes and the seizure of a radio station by protesters. The subsequent military crackdown resulted in over 18,000 deaths (Taiwan Bar, 2015). This tragic series of events became known as the February 28 Incident, marking a significant disillusionment with the new regime, contrasting sharply with the advancements made under previous colonial rule (Memorial Foundation of 228, n.d.).

After their defeat by the Communist forces (later known as People's Republic of China, PRC) in the Chinese Civil War, the KMT retreated to Taiwan in 1949 and maintained the formal country name of the Republic of China (ROC), which continues to this day. This name has been a source of confusion both within Taiwan and internationally. Following the February 28 Incident, the KMT imposed martial law and began a strict regime in Taiwan, promoting the idea that Taiwan represented the last stronghold of traditional Chinese culture. The KMT claimed that they would eventually retake mainland China and restore their rule over the entire nation. This narrative marginalised the existing Taiwanese culture and cuisine, deeming them inferior to the 'true Chinese' culture brought by the new Chinese immigrants, who constituted only 10-15% of the population (Wei, 2023). Despite the KMT's aspirations, the return to mainland China never materialised, and the prolonged period of martial law, which lasted 38 years, planted the seeds of change among the Taiwanese people (鄭, 2024).

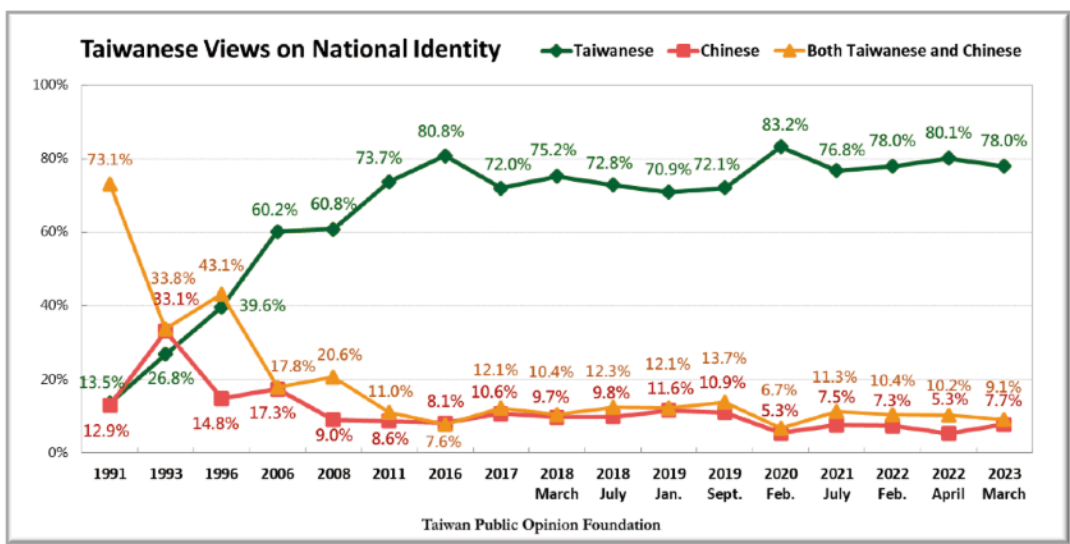
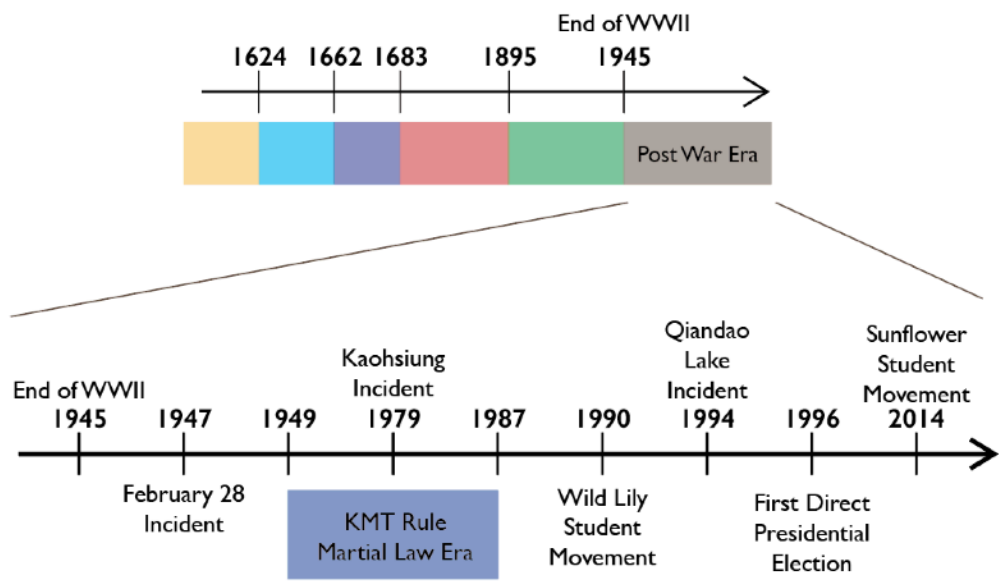
During Taiwan's martial law period, the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident emerged as a pivotal moment in the island's push for democracy. Led by Formosa Magazine's Shih Ming-Teh (施明德) and Huang Hsin-Chieh (黃信介), along with other opposition figures, a Human Rights Day demonstration was held, prompting the KMT government to arrest key opposition leaders. This event is considered a catalyst for subsequent democratic movements in Taiwan (Taipei Times, 2020).

In 1990, the Wild Lily student movement further propelled the democratisation process. Over 22,000 participants rallied for a democratic electoral system, marking Taiwan's first peaceful mass protest. President Lee Tung-Hui supported the movement and initiated democratic reforms that summer, leading to Taiwan's first democratic election in 1996 (Liberty Times Net, 2021). The Wild Lily movement was a critical step towards establishing a pluralistic democracy in Taiwan. The Qiandao Lake incident in 1994, involving the kidnapping and murder of Taiwanese tourists in Zhejiang, China, significantly impacted Taiwanese identity. The local Chinese authorities' mishandling of the investigation, including censorship and unprofessional procedures, sparked outrage in Taiwan and contributed to a rejection of the KMT's goal of reclaiming China, reinforcing a distinct Taiwanese identity (Taiwan Bar, 2021).

Throughout the 1990s, significant events such as the Wild Lily Student Movement, the Qiandao Lake Incident, and Taiwan's first democratic presidential election contributed to a sharp increase in the number of Taiwanese citizens identifying exclusively as Taiwanese, as indicated by data from the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation (2023). In 2014, the KMT government quickly passed a trade agreement facilitating Chinese investment in Taiwan, bypassing the necessary public discourse and transparency. This action was perceived by many as an undermining of democracy, leading to the Sunflower Movement. During this protest, hundreds of students and citizens occupied legislative and executive buildings for weeks, voicing concerns that the trade pact would subject Taiwan to undue political influence from Beijing (The Reporter, 2024). This movement not only intensified opposition to Chinese influence but also propelled many of its activists into political roles,

significantly boosting the percentage of people identifying as solely Taiwanese to 80.8% by 2016 (Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation, 2023).

As of 2023, 78% of Taiwan's population identifies as Taiwanese, highlighting a clear majority that does not consider themselves Chinese. This identity crisis extends to defining what constitutes 'Taiwanese culture.' Maguire (1998) noted the complexity for Taiwanese in rejecting Chinese culture while retaining a Chinese racial identity, as even their language shares roots with the Fujian province of mainland China. This blurs the lines between Chinese and Taiwanese identities. Despite these challenges, Taiwanese are increasingly asserting a unique cultural identity, partly to counteract the People's Republic of China's (PRC) claims and prevent any justification for an invasion under the guise of unification. The PRC's aggressive stance, including a significant increase in military incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone (ADIZ) in 2022 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023), and the international political landscape where only 12 countries officially recognise Taiwan, further complicate the situation. Despite these pressures, Taiwan's commitment to democracy and distinct identity strengthens in response to the PRC's intimidation tactics and the ongoing threat of assimilation under communist rule.



Modern Taiwanese Culinary Narratives of Identity

Amidst the challenges of not being internationally recognised as a separate nation and facing the threat of China, Taiwanese people have been solidifying their cultural identity. This process serves as an internal mechanism for reconciling a complex history and facilitating collective healing. Externally, it functions as a form of soft power. By promoting Taiwanese culture globally, Taiwan not only shares its heritage but also affirms its uniqueness, countering the reductive stories shaped by global politics. In recent times, Taiwanese chefs have been delving into defining the 'Taiwanese flavour,' resonating with the Taiwanese penchant for hospitality and gastronomy. This culinary exploration is part of 'gastrodiplomacy,' a strategy that has seen food industry professionals, authors, and academics championing Taiwanese cuisine. They are reviving sophisticated traditional dishes and integrating local, including Indigenous, ingredients, thereby crafting a food culture distinct from China's. Taiwanese cuisine thus becomes an expression of the island's aspiration for acknowledgment as a distinct nation or, at the very least, as a unique cultural entity.

Chef Yu Hsuan Cheng, the visionary behind YU Chocolatier, is renowned for his innovative chocolate bonbons that infuse traditional Taiwanese flavours. His creations range from mango pepper and ruby black tea to caramel soy sauce and makauy pistachio. Makauy, known as *Litsea cubeba*, is a native spice extensively used in indigenous Taiwanese cuisine, resembling black pepper but with a unique aroma that blends notes of pepper, ginger, and lemon. This spice has inspired many chefs, including Chef Yu, to explore and integrate new Taiwanese flavours into their culinary works. In an interview with VERSE in 2020, Chef Yu expressed his desire for YU Chocolatier to mirror the diverse tapestry of Taiwanese culture and its distinctive flavours, aiming to be a conduit for Taiwanese taste and culinary innovation. His contributions to the culinary world were recognised in 2022 when he was honoured as a Gamechanging Producer by the 50 Next Award, an initiative by the World's 50 Best Restaurants (Vialou-Clark, 2022).

Chef André, founder and chef at RAW, a Michelin 2-star restaurant that presents Taiwanese cuisine in French fine dining style, is deeply committed to defining the Taiwanese flavour spectrum. In an interview with VERSE (張 and 溫, 2023), he expressed, "Being Taiwanese, I feel responsible for redefining our generation's Taiwanese flavour, and RAW is my gift to Taiwan." He highlighted that eight years ago, in 2015, no restaurant in Taiwan used exclusively local ingredients—a practice not even found in Chinese or Western establishments. RAW was pioneering in its goal to utilise 100% Taiwanese ingredients. Chef André sees himself as a curator, crafting each season's menu to explore and encapsulate different aspects of Taiwanese culture into unique dining experiences. The success of RAW has inspired many in Taiwan to reconnect with and value local produce. Additionally, Chef André leads the Taiwan Flavour Spectrum project, a significant cultural initiative using technology and historical data to analyse and define the most commonly used flavours and elements in Taiwanese cuisine (王, 2021). This project aims to educate the younger generation about the 'Taiwanese flavour spectrum' and encourage a deeper appreciation of their cultural heritage.

In an interview with Kang (2019), Hsueh Yung-Po (薛永波), known as Chef Po and founder of Old New Taiwanese Cuisine, expressed his desire to elevate Taiwanese food beyond the common perception of street stalls and stir-fry shops. He questioned why Taiwanese cuisine, with its rich culture, didn't have the same recognition as Western,

Japanese, or Chinese cuisines with branded restaurants and upscale storefronts. Chef Po's vision led to the creation of Old New Taiwanese Cuisine, a restaurant that reimagines traditional Taiwanese banquet dishes with a modern twist, served in a space that blends contemporary and nostalgic design elements. This innovative approach to dining has garnered attention, earning the restaurant a spot in the 2022 and 2023 Bib Gourmand Selection by The Michelin Guide (Common Wealth Magazine, 2023), attracting international food lovers to experience Taiwanese culture through Chef Po's culinary creations.

Building on the success of Old New Taiwanese Cuisine, Chef Po's son, Hsueh Shun-Ti (薛舜迪), launched Yonshin Tea & Cake Selection Bar, targeting the younger Taiwanese generation who value high-quality, unique dining experiences. Hsueh's tea salon focuses on premium Taiwanese teas, paired with innovative Taiwanese dishes that employ modern cooking techniques like smoking and sous vide to enhance flavours. The salon's dessert



highlight is an oolong tea-flavoured crêpe cake. The interior design of the tea salon draws inspiration from the Japanese Empire era, a time when Taiwanese tea was a leading global export. This concept has resonated with young patrons, leading to the opening of four new branches within six years, as reported by VERSE in 2022. The success of both ventures reflects a growing trend among the younger generation to reimagine and celebrate Taiwanese cuisine in new and exciting ways.

New Taiwanese Identity

In conclusion, the old Taiwanese saying 「吃飯皇帝大」 (eating is more important than the emperor) encapsulates the profound cultural significance of food in Taiwan. Throughout its history, Taiwan has been a melting pot of culinary influences, each contributing to the rich tapestry of flavors that define the island's cuisine today. These flavors not only delight the palate but also carry the complex history and cultural identity of the Taiwanese people.

Amidst the ongoing threats from China and the challenges of maintaining a distinct identity under geopolitical pressures, food has emerged as a battleground for cultural expression and sovereignty. The resilience of Taiwanese democracy, tested by external threats and internal challenges, finds a parallel in the culinary world, where traditional dishes act as symbols of national pride and independence. The concept of "gastrodiplomacy" has gained importance, allowing Taiwan to engage with the global community and assert its cultural uniqueness in the absence of formal diplomatic avenues.

Internationally, the acclaim garnered by Taiwanese chefs and their culinary creations bolsters Taiwan's 'gastrodiplomacy' efforts, a vital tool given the challenges the nation faces in conducting formal diplomacy due to the current political climate. Moreover, the triumph of Taiwanese drag queen Nymphia Wind on the renowned reality TV show RuPaul's Drag Race, donning a gown inspired by Taiwan's iconic bubble tea for the final showcase, is a testament to Taiwan's cultural outreach. Her victory is particularly noteworthy as she is the first East Asian to win the competition. This achievement coincides with Taiwan's distinction as the first country in Asia to legalise same-sex marriage. These achievements highlight how Taiwan's unique blend of culinary and cultural elements—encompassing the island's democratic values, diverse landscapes, and vibrant society—continues to enrich and define the global understanding of Taiwanese identity. The essence of Taiwanese identity is a symphony of the sea, the mountains, and democratic values, with each individual embodying the island's diverse and distinctive flavours. Through the universal language of food, Taiwan communicates its story of resilience, diversity, and democracy, inviting the world to appreciate the depth and richness of its cultural heritage.

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