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The Korean Gastronomic Aesthetic in Santiago de Chile: A Sensory Ethnography of Patronato

La estética gastronómica coreana en Santiago de Chile: Una etnografía sensorial de Patronato

A estética gastronômica coreana em Santiago de Chile: Uma etnografia sensorial de Patronato

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Abstract

This research focuses on Korean food and everything that happens around it. The question that guides this research is: how is the Korean gastronomic aesthetic configured in the Patronato neighborhood in Santiago de Chile? Through 18 interviews and non-participant observation over 1 year, the relationship of the South Korean gastronomic community with Patronato was explored, its aesthetics characterized and diners' perceptions investigated. The essay concludes that Patronato exemplifies a multi-territorial gastronomic aesthetic that blends symbolic and material elements of Korean culture with local Chilean realities. This dynamic process not only reflects the adaptation of Korean immigrants to their new environment but also illustrates how Korean gastronomic culture has been integrated and valued within the urban fabric of Santiago. Furthermore, the growing presence of Korean restaurants and the influence of Korean cultural industries, such as k-pop, have contributed to the legitimation and acceptance of Korean food in Chile, making it a desirable and accessible aspect of urban culture.

Keywords: Food aesthetics, *hansik*, *hallyu*, migration, Korean wave, Patronato. Resumen

En la presente investigación nos centramos en la comida coreana y en todo lo que ocurre en torno a ella, con la siguiente pregunta como guía: ¿cómo se configura la estética gastronómica coreana en el barrio Patronato, en Santiago de Chile? A través de 18 entrevistas y observación no-participante durante un año, se exploró la relación de la comunidad gastronómica surcoreana con Patronato, se caracterizó su estética y se investigó la percepción de los comensales. Concluimos que Patronato ejemplifica una estética gastronómica multiterritorial que mezcla elementos simbólicos y materiales de la cultura coreana con realidades locales chilenas. Este proceso dinámico no solo refleja la adaptación de los inmigrantes coreanos a su nuevo entorno, sino que también ilustra cómo la cultura gastronómica coreana se ha integrado y valorado dentro del tejido urbano de Santiago. Además, la creciente presencia de restaurantes coreanos y la influencia de industrias culturales coreanas, como el K-pop, han contribuido a la legitimización y aceptación de la comida coreana en Chile, convirtiéndola en un aspecto deseable y accesible de la cultura urbana.

Palabras clave: Estética alimentaria, *hansik*, *hallyu*, migración, ola coreana, Patronato.

Resumo

Na presente investigação centraremos na comida coreana e em tudo o que acontece en torno a ela, com a seguinte pergunta como guia: como se configura a estética gastronômica coreana no bairro de Patronato, em Santiago de Chile? Através de 18 entrevistas e observação não-participante durante um ano, explorou-se a relação da comunidade gastronômica sul-coreana com Patronato, caracterizou-se sua estética e investigou-se a percepção dos comensais. Concluimos que Patronato exemplifica uma estética gastronômica multiterritorial que mistura elementos simbólicos e materiais da cultura corean com realidades locais chilenas. Esse processo dinâmico não reflete só a adaptação dos inmigrantes coreanos ao seu novo entorno, mas também ilustra como a cultura gastronômica coreana tem se integrado e valorado dentro do tecido urbano de Santiago. Além disso, a crescente presença de restaurantes coreanos e a influência de indústrias culturais coreanas, como o K-pop, tem contribuido à legitimização e aceitação da comida coreana no Chile, transformando-a num aspecto desejável e acesível da cultura urbana.

Palavras-chave: Estética alimentária, *hansik*, *hallyu*, migração, onda coreana, Patronato.

Introduction

Since 2015, there has been a significant increase in the popularity of Korean culture, often referred to as the "K-wave" or *hallyu*. This cultural phenomenon has manifested across social networks, media, and public spaces, particularly in the Patronato neighborhood, which has hosted Korean restaurants for over two decades. However, it is only in the last ten years that these establishments have gained recognition and proliferated. This study focuses on sensory ethnography, encompassing a design that engages all five senses. The central object of investigation is Korean gastronomy, conceived as a comprehensive phenomenon that includes not only dishes and flavors but also raw materials, culinary techniques, cooks, diners, restaurants, and menus, as outlined by Perullo (2011). I chose to center my research on food to construct an understanding of Korean gastronomic aesthetics in Patronato. While the Korean community itself is an important subject, previous researchers have noted the challenges of accessing this group for interviews, as individuals may feel self-conscious about participating in research. Consequently, my research concentrates on the food and the surrounding experiences. The guiding question for this study is: How is Korean gastronomic aesthetics configured in the Patronato neighborhood of Santiago de Chile?

To answer this question, I will first present the global phenomenon of hallyu (Gendler, 2018; KOCIS; Cheong, 2022; Wang, 2022), alongside the characteristics of traditional Korean cuisine, or hansik (Chon, 2007; Otkay & Ekinci, 2019; Pettid, 2008; Kim et al., 2016; Ha, 2017), including adaptations to the local context. I will also discuss the Korean diaspora in Chile and relevant research that has examined its socioeconomic and cultural dimensions (Choi & Aguirre, 2020; Mancilla & Breton, 2021; Wang, 2022). Additionally, I will provide theoretical insights into the study and analysis of gastronomy more broadly (Rozin & Fallon, 1980; Mennell, 1995; Perullo, 2011; Riccorda, 2015; Stanno & Bentley, 2022; Volli, 2022). Following this, I will describe *hansik* through the experiences and preparations of the Korean gastronomic community, ultimately proposing a framework for Korean gastronomic aesthetics in the Patronato neighborhood.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology employed in this study included semi-structured interviews (Tonon, 2009), sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), non-participant observation and data triangulation. Sensory ethnography offered an immersive lens into Korean food aesthetics in Patronato. Following

Pink (2009), I focused on flavors, textures, and embodied practices such as adjusting to spice levels, using metal chopsticks, and observing the coordination of side dishes. From April 2023 to December 2024, weekly visits included repeated meals, informal conversations, and fieldnotes, allowing the identification of patterns in service, space, and customer interaction. A key limitation was the lack of access to kitchen areas. Internal policies and workplace dynamics restricted observation of food preparation and behind-the-scenes labor. To mitigate this, I triangulated interviews with kitchen staff, dining room observations, and customer narratives. While this provided insight into front-of-house dynamics, further research would be needed to explore the backstage culinary sphere in depth.

This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of Korean food aesthetics in the Patronato neighborhood, combining direct sensory experiences with personal narratives from interviewees. For example, I focused not just on flavors and textures, but also on adjusting to varying levels of spiciness. My initial low tolerance for spicy food required a gradual adaptation process, which involved starting with non-spicy tteokbokki and progressively increasing the spice level. This experiential adaptation was vital to my ethnographic work, encompassing visual, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile dimensions, including the use of spoons and chopsticks.

In the semi-structured interviews, I identified three main respondent profiles: restaurant owners (11 total), Korean diners (4 total), and Chilean diners (3 total) (Table 1). Among the Korean diners, distinctions were made between those who had recently arrived in Chile, those who had grown up in Korea, and those who had spent their upbringing in Chile. Other researchers' experiences with the Korean community in Patronato have often been fraught with challenges; two mentioned difficulties in securing interviews and in presenting the thesis concept that involved community members as subjects of study. To navigate these challenges, I increased my presence in the neighborhood, made regular visits, and respected local customs, such as greeting the elderly.

This approach helped me become recognized within the community, resulting in a total of eleven interviews. Furthermore, I conducted non-participant observation at various times and locations to identify street vendors and the demographics of restaurant patrons. Field notes and photographs were collected, with the consent of restaurant owners, to document characteristic decorations and utensils. Finally, I analyzed the information gathered through these different methods to conceptualize the object of study for this research. Through this comprehensive approach, I aim to illuminate how Korean gastronomic aesthetics are constructed and experienced within the dynamic context of the Patronato neighborhood, ultimately contributing to a broader

understanding of cultural integration and adaptation in Chile.

Table 1. List of interviewees
Tabla 1. Lista de entrevistados

Code	Group	Age	Gender
ED1	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Male
ED2	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Female
ED3	Restaurant owner	50-60 years	Female
ED4	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Female
ED5	Restaurant owner	30-40 years	Female
ED6	Restaurant owner	50-60 years	Female
ED7	Restaurant owner	20-30 years	Male
ED8	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Female
ED9	Restaurant owner	50-60 years	Male
ED10	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Female
ED11	Restaurant owner	40-50 years	Male
CCH1	Chilean foodie	20-30 years	Female
CCH2	Chilean foodie	30-40 years	Female
CCH3	Chilean foodie	40-50 years	Female
CCO1	Korean diner	40-50 years	Male
CCO2	Korean diner	30-40 years	Male
CCOCH1	Korean diner	20-30 years	Female
CCOCH2	Korean diner	20-30 years	Female

Source: own elaboration. Fuente: elaboración propia.

Hallyu and hansik: Musical and culinary waves

The context of this research encompasses both global and local dimensions, centering on the phenomenon of hallyu and the recent Korean migrations to Chile. Hallyu, or the Korean wave, has significantly shaped the global landscape of Korean culture. According to the Korea Culture and Information Service (KOCIS) of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, hallyu has popularized Korean entertainment in Asia and beyond. KOCIS identifies three stages of hallyu diffusion: the first reached the Chinese market in the 1990s; the second spread to Japan towards the late 1990s, primarily through Korean soap operas (K-dramas); and the third stage gained global traction in the early

2000s with the rise of K-dramas and K-pop. Cheong (2022) distinguishes between two Korean waves: the first, from 1997 to 2007, marked by the widespread broadcasting of Korean series in neighboring Asian countries; and the second, beginning in 2008, characterized by the global success of K-pop.

While Cheong (2022) critiques late hallyu cultural productions, especially K-pop, for catering primarily to Western tastes, she notes that this initial interest in music groups often leads fans to learn the Korean language, consequently fostering curiosity about Korean cuisine and other as cultural elements. Kim Bok-rae (cited in Wang, 2022) outlines four stages of hallyu: K-drama, K-pop, K-culture, and K-style, with the latter stages emphasizing everyday aspects of Korean life. In response to a financial crisis in the late 1990s, the South Korean government initiated the Cultural Industries Promotion Act, promoting soap operas and pop groups throughout Asia and initiating the first wave of hallyu. Gendler (2018) posits that K-dramas and films serve as initial points of contact with Korean culture in Argentina, while K-pop acts as a pivotal element of the second wave, introducing fans to various aspects of hallyu.

In addition to entertainment, KOCIS highlights the expansion of hallyu into other cultural realms, including gastronomy. Chon (2007) observes that the rise of Korean cuisine began in the early 21st century, spurred by the World Cup held in Japan and South Korea. This evolution reflects the influence of historical and religious practices, such as Buddhism's prohibition on meat consumption and Confucianism during the Joseon Dynasty, which encouraged preservation methods like boiling, roasting, and pickling to optimize ingredient use.

Korean culinary diversity (Otkay & Ekinci, 2019) can be traced back to the Three Kingdoms period (37 BC-935 AD), when interactions with China introduced agricultural tools and cooking techniques. Historical events, including wars and invasions, also necessitated innovative culinary adaptations to combat famine. Robin Ha (2017) describes various Korean dishes, including kimchi from the south, bindaetteok from the north, and gyeongdan from the center. While Korea primarily interacted with China and Japan, the 18th-century introduction of American crops such as corn, potatoes, and chili peppers further diversified Korean cuisine, resulting in innovations like red kimchi, now widely available in Korean restaurants worldwide. Otkay and Ekinci introduces the concept of cultural gastronomy, as the culture eating and drinking is the values on which the nation reflects their own characteristics (Otkay and Ekinci, 2019).

The culinary dimension of hallyu, or hansik, has become central to South Korea's cultural diplomacy. In 2009, President Lee Myung-bak launched the Global Hansik Campaign, using food to shape Korea's international image. As Kim notes, the goal was to position Korean cuisine "as one of the top international cuisines by 2017"

(Kim, 2017: 1), expanding restaurant presence, exports, and culinary tourism. To convey a refined national image, the campaign promoted court cuisine from the Joseon dynasty as Korea's representative food. This effort aimed to "draw a straight line from the Joseon dynasty to the present" (Kim, 2017: 4), bypassing colonialism and war. However, this top-down choice drew criticism for sidelining Korea's diverse foodscape. Critics argued that aristocratic cuisine erased regional and everyday dishes that better reflect Korean life today. A 2009 national survey found 77% of respondents favored promoting popular and localized foods over elite traditional ones (Korea Food Foundation, cited in Kim, 2017: 6).

This controversy raises questions of representation and authenticity. While the state sought to standardize hansik for branding, many chefs and scholars challenged the focus on court cuisine. As Professor Lee Jae-gyu observed, it was historically cosmopolitan and shaped by foreign influences, undermining claims of it being the most "authentic Korean cuisine" (Kim, 2017: 7).

Korean cuisine is increasingly recognized for its health benefits; in 2004, it was acknowledged by the WHO as a balanced dietary model due to its composition of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals. Pettid (2008) emphasizes that in Korea, food and health are deeply intertwined, echoing the traditional belief that food serves medicinal purposes. Modern science supports the idea that dietary choices significantly impact health. Otkay and Ekinci explain that Korean food culture embodies "the idea of Yak Sik Dong Won which means that the body-healing resources are the same as the sources of eating" (Otkay and Ekinci, 2019: 2).

Examining hansik, or Korean cuisine, reveals that it primarily centers on rice as a staple dish, complemented by fermented proteins and vegetables. Kim et al. (2016) differentiate between K-food and K-diet; the latter strives to uphold ethical and moral principles of Korean gastronomy, promoting healthy, spiritually nourishing, and communal meals. In contrast, K-food encompasses any food produced in Korea, including Western dishes with Korean twists, such as kimchi pizza. This essay seeks to elucidate how hansik serves as a bridge between the global phenomenon of hallyu and local cultural dynamics, particularly within the migrant community of Patronato.

Korean gastrodiplomacy

Soft power is a nation's capacity to attract rather than coerce (Rockower, 2012). It works through institutions, civil society, and everyday contacts (Djumala, 2020). Gastrodiplomacy applies this logic to food, using national cuisine to build sympathy and brand identity—not to end hunger, but to foster affinity (Rockower, 2012; Djumala, 2020).

Hallyu exemplifies this strategy: it extends Korean soft power, with food now complementing K-pop and

K-dramas (Jang & Paik, 2012). After critics resisted the royal-cuisine focus of the 2009 Global Hansik Campaign, officials promoted more accessible dishes and grassroots projects such as the Kimchi Bus, which offered tastings in over 30 countries (Nihayati et al., 2022). Results are tangible: kimchi exports rose from USD 104 million in 2011 to USD 144 million in 2020, reaching 80+ markets (Nihayati et al., 2022: 57).

Korean gastrodiplomacy now moves on two tracks. State programs circulate curated heritage narratives (Rockower, 2012; Kim, 2017) while diasporic and consumer practices remix those narratives in local settings (Jang & Paik, 2012). In Santiago's Patronato district, migrants, Chilean diners, and global media co-produce meanings: the same bibimbap may signal royal tradition, street comfort, or wellness cuisine, illustrating how everyday encounters continually reshape Korea's culinary image (Kim, 2017).

Korean diaspora in Chile

According to the 2017 Census, the Korean resident population in Chile totaled 2,510, a number significantly smaller than the Peruvian (192,082) or Colombian (108,001) diasporas. However, the Korean presence is palpable in Barrio Patronato. Choi and Aguirre (2020) conducted a review of research on the Korean diaspora in Chile and identified six key studies: (i) Mellado's (1994) examination of bilateral treaties that facilitated Korean immigration, (ii) Vial and Maxwell's (1995) ethnographic work in Patronato, (iii) Rossel's (2005) analysis of neighborhood identities, (iv) Min's (2005) investigation into Chilean perceptions of the Korean community, (v) Pérez Le-Fort's (2009) study of Korean perceptions of Chileans, and (vi) Aguirre's(2011) analysis of religion's role in integration. Additional contributions include Mancilla and Betron (2021) and the dissertations of Cheong (2022) and Wang (2022).

Choi and Aguirre (2020) analyze the Korean community's interactions with three groups: Chilean society, the Korean society of origin, and the local Korean diaspora. Their relationship with Chilean society is predominantly economic, as Chileans are the primary customers in the textile and clothing sectors. However, this connection is often limited by language barriers and remains primarily transactional. In contrast, connections to the society of origin are practical for work but marked by psychological distance due to seasonal and time differences. It is common for community members to travel to China for business, allowing them to visit relatives and purchase Korean products like food. For instance, Ms. YH mentions that she often visits Korea to buy supplies and enjoy

homemade kimchi before returning to Chile.

Interaction within the Korean community in Chile largely occurs through churches, which support integration into Chilean society but also create a stronger bond among locals. This focus on community, however, can lead to pressure and stress due to a lack of privacy (Choi and Aguirre, 2020). The authors conclude that the Korean community in Chile struggles to establish roots in either society, living instead in a liminal space between the two. Mancilla and Breton (2021) also explore the integration of the Korean diaspora, particularly in Patronato as a communal hub for labor relations and the sale of Korean products. They note that Korean migration has benefitted Chile's neoliberal economic model, as many migrants possess the capital to launch businesses. However, there is an ambivalent view among Chileans toward Koreans, marked by both positive and negative perceptions that reflect ignorance about the community. Gastronomy emerges as a potential avenue for interaction, facilitating cultural exchange through an aesthetic experience of food that transcends language barriers.

Choi and Aguirre (2020) emphasize that the relationship between the Korean diaspora and the Chilean population is mainly commercial. While Korean clothing and textile shops initially dominated, the number of Chilean and foreign customers in Korean supermarkets and restaurants has surged, attributed to the popularity of K-pop and the broader Korean cultural industry (Choi & Aguirre, 2020). This phenomenon serves as a gateway to other cultural aspects, including cuisine.

Wang (2022) notes that for the second and third generations of Korean migrants, food is a crucial link to their heritage. The phrase "Have you eaten?" encapsulates the importance of food in Korean culture, shaped by historical periods of famine during Japanese colonization and subsequent wars, which reflects intergenerational trauma. Wang highlights the ritualistic aspects of Korean dining, where etiquette plays a significant role in social interactions. Gratitude is expressed before meals, the preparer of the food is acknowledged, and the eldest person begins eating first. The distribution of food further differentiates shared from individual dishes, accompanied by specific utensils like metal spoons and chopsticks.

In 2022, the Korean Gastronomic Association in Chile (AGCC) was founded. While not all restaurants in Patronato are members, the association has significantly boosted the visibility of Korean cuisine in the area, particularly through its active Instagram presence. Of the 19 Korean restaurants in the AGCC, 13 are located in Patronato, including Misoya, Maru, Wok-a-holic, Knara, Ramen Café, Oiso, Hanuri, Sukine, Café Mobssie, Hana, Bunsik, and Restaurant Seoul.

Food studies

This research seeks to understand the Korean gastronomic aesthetics in the Patronato neighborhood, Santiago, by exploring the relationship between the South Korean gastronomic community and the neighborhood, the design of restaurants, the dishes and flavors, and the perceptions of Chilean diners. Although food is an everyday aspect of life, it has been studied from a sociological and anthropological perspective to understand its wider significance (Rozin, 1987; Mennell, 1995; Fishler, 1998, 2011; Harris, 2009). From an aesthetic standpoint, Perullo (2011) has examined food as a cultural and sensory phenomenon, considering cooking, plate presentation, the ritualistic component of eating, and the sensory process of tasting new or familiar flavors. Riccorda (2015) has explored the sensory implications of encountering unfamiliar food, particularly when travelling and sampling local dishes.

Social approach

Harris (2009), founder of cultural materialism, argues that food choices are driven by environmental and material factors, with food being an adaptation to available ingredients. He suggests that cultural distinctions regarding edibility stem from a cost-benefit analysis of the context. For instance, maize's abundance in the Americas or rice in Asia influenced their dominance in Incan and Chinese cuisines. Harris proposes three levels of food analysis: material infrastructure, economy, and superstructure. With globalization, these levels have become interconnected, enabling access to foods from diverse regions and traditions.

Rozin and Fallon (1980) highlight the cultural component in food aversions and preferences, noting that people learn to distinguish what is desirable or undesirable without prior tasting. They identify four categories of food rejection: disgust (physical revulsion), danger (stemming from negative experiences), inappropriateness (non-food objects), and distaste (a rejection based on knowledge of the food's origin). In "A Perspective on Disgust" (Rozin and Fallon, 1987), they link disgust to food, emphasizing its social component, where disgust is tied to status and perceived contamination. To understand Chilean responses to Korean cuisine, it is important to consider the unfamiliarity or potential disgust that new textures and flavors evoke. The soft, chewy textures of some Korean dishes and the absence of salt in rice contrast with Chilean food, potentially provoking initial rejection but also sparking curiosity, leading to culinary exploration. This encounter challenges established food preferences and offers an opportunity to broaden gastronomic and cultural horizons.

Mennell (1995) explores how globalization has facilitated the coexistence of foods from different

cultures, reducing culinary contrasts and expanding food preferences. While mass-produced food is often criticized for standardization, Mennell argues that it has increased access to a variety of foods, blurring cultural food boundaries and diminishing fear of the unfamiliar. While global cuisines like Chinese, Japanese, and Italian are widely available, significant differences exist between their original and adapted forms. For example, the sushi popular in Chile stems from adaptations made in the United States in the 1960s, when a Japanese chef modified traditional sushi to suit American tastes. This version, now popular in Chile, differs from how sushi is typically consumed in Japan. Such adaptations become integrated into new cultures, a culinary fusion occurs which, while it may blur traditional boundaries, also enriches and diversifies the global gastronomic experience, generating new culinary aesthetics.

Food aesthetic

Perullo (2011) defines "gastronomic aesthetics" as an emotional and intellectual experience involving technique, rules, and sensory engagement, combining culinary creativity with aesthetics. He breaks down food aesthetics into three areas: i) raw ingredients, ii) the creative cooking process, and iii) the presentation, including the restaurant's ambiance and menu. Riccorda (2015) complements this by stating that food is a cultural experience reflecting a group's identity. Food often serves as a primary introduction to diverse cultures, helping outsiders integrate and understand symbolic values through culinary practices.

Stanno and Bentley argue that migrations and global communications "expose local food identities to global food alterities, originating remarkable processes of transformation that continuously reshape and redefine such identities and alterities" (Stanno and Bentley, 2022: 3).

For example, while Italian cuisine was well accepted in Chile, Chinese food faced initial rejection, shaped by xenophobia towards Chinese immigrants. This illustrates how diaspora groups introduce their culinary traditions, creating disparities and hegemonies influenced by globalization and migration.

To understand Korean gastronomy in Chile's Patronato neighbourhood, I apply Ugo Volli's (2022) semiotic analysis of food, which explores the cultural meanings embedded in gastronomy. Volli views food as a product of social labour, with each dish representing a sociocultural decision. He emphasises how factors such as time, place, and context turn food consumption into significant social acts, shaped by cultural choices. Volli's analysis is grounded in classical rhetoric, dividing food discourse into five steps: *inventio* (defining what is edible), *dispositio* (planning and cooking), *elocutio* (preparing the consumption space), *actio* (eating rituals), and *memoria* (documenting the event, such as thank-you notes).

This framework underscores the symbolic power of food in cultural identity. As Volli (2022) and Riccorda (2015) highlight, food enables outsiders to transcend language barriers and connect with diverse communities. Similarly, Stanno and Bentley (2022) show how migrations continuously reshape food identities, illustrating how globalization fosters culinary fusion and enriches cultural experiences through food adaptation and transformation.

Following Mannur (2007), in diasporic contexts, aesthetic responses to food are closely entangled with memory, belonging, and nostalgia. The author argues that for migrant communities, culinary practices are less about replicating an original homeland and more about crafting emotional anchors in unfamiliar settings. As she puts it, "culinary nostalgia is not about an exact replication of the foods of the past but rather about approximations that enable a sense of continuity" (Mannur, 2007: 15). Taste becomes a sensory gateway to affective memory, allowing diasporic subjects to articulate identity through embodied practice. The preparation and consumption of dishes such as *kimchi jjigae or mandu are thus not merely acts of tradition but dynamic performances that sustain cultural intimacy across time and space.*

Parasecoli (2014) expands this perspective by emphasizing that food aesthetics in migratory settings are shaped not only by sensory engagement but by broader social, economic, and cultural forces. He argues that aesthetic appreciation of food is "always mediated by knowledge, memories, social relationships, and cultural training" (Parasecoli, 2014, p. 430). In diasporic contexts, visual and spatial choices—such as the arrangement of dishes, the décor of the restaurant, or the pacing of a meal—become tools for symbolic communication. These elements allow migrants to express authenticity, cosmopolitanism, or hybridity, depending on the audience. In Patronato, Korean restaurateurs negotiate such visual cues strategically, creating aesthetic environments that resonate with both Korean memory and Chilean consumer expectations.

Hansik at Patronato

Although Korean restaurants are present in various areas of Santiago, the transformation of Patronato is particularly notable due to its historical significance. Once a predominantly Palestinian neighborhood in the 20th century, today Patronato has evolved into a vibrant Korean enclave. Using Haesbert's (2011) concept of multi-territoriality, Patronato becomes a space where migrant communities recreate and adapt elements of their places of origin, forming new cultural dynamics and identities. The Korean presence is officially recognized in territorial records and population maps, with landmarks like the Korean church and Saturday school for Korean children

symbolizing this acknowledgment. The renaming of the street to “Seoul” represents both municipal recognition and the community’s active role in claiming and shaping their space.

In celebration of 60 years of diplomatic ties between Chile and South Korea, the Korean Gastronomic Association in Chile (AGCC), along with the Korean Embassy, organized a competition promoting Korean restaurants and cuisine. Participants visited 34 restaurants, collecting stickers on a map provided by the AGCC. The event offered prizes like Samsung products and K-pop merchandise. In 2023, the competition was relaunched, though with reduced prizes and without embassy sponsorship. Through platforms like Instagram, the AGCC continues promoting Korean restaurants, inviting the public to explore Patronato, enjoy its cuisine, and engage with the Korean cultural experience. The AGCC has created its own map to promote the Korean restaurants located in Patronato. Through platforms such as Instagram, this association invites the general community to visit these establishments, enjoy Korean cuisine, and engage with the cultural richness represented by this diaspora. This map not only serves as institutional recognition but also as a symbolic and material appropriation of the space they inhabit. Through its posts on Instagram, the AGCC encourages people to visit the associated restaurants in Patronato, savor their food, and immerse themselves in the cultural experience they offer.

Figure 1. Street renamed “Seul”
Figura 1. Calle rebautizada como “Seul”

Source: author’s photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

Cooking, sonmat 손맛

The results of interviews with eleven Korean restaurant owners in Patronato highlight their diverse migration stories and culinary journeys. Participants, aged 30 to 60, were contacted via Instagram and in person, though language barriers led to a self-selection bias. The interviewees, who arrived in Chile at different times, mostly migrated with their families. Several initially worked in other sectors, like textiles, before opening restaurants. Many learned cooking from their mothers and grandmothers or are self-taught.

The migration stories also reflect familial influences on cooking, with many interviewees having previous experience in restaurants in other Latin American countries. In certain cases, the decision to open a restaurant arose from the necessity to adapt to the new environment or to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the Korean wave and the growing popularity of Korean cuisine. A recurring theme among the interviewees was the need to adapt their dishes to the Chilean palate. While most adapted their dishes to suit Chilean tastes—adjusting spice, salt, and sweetness levels—some owners emphasized preserving authentic Korean flavors, resisting the temptation to fully "Chileanize" their cuisine.

Korean restaurant owners in Patronato highlight the health benefits and complexity of their cuisine, noting methods like steaming and fermentation that enhance nutrition. Dishes such as kimchi and long-cooked broths exemplify the time and effort involved. They emphasize the communal nature of Korean meals, with shared dishes and unseasoned rice to balance flavors. However, some non-Korean customers struggle with this structure, leading to adjustments in spiciness, saltiness, and sweetness to suit Chilean tastes. One owner mentioned educating diners on how to eat banchan because "they do not know how to eat the side dishes (banchan); they eat them as an appetizer" (ED2), while another (ED11) noted initial confusion with Chinese food, with customers expecting fried rice or sweet and sour chicken.

One interviewee (ED3) indicated that they have been studying and adapting their offerings to make them more "palatable" to non-Korean customers. Additionally, four of the eleven interviewees stated that they have adjusted their dishes for Chilean and non-Korean clientele, preparing food that is saltier or sweeter than usual. One interviewee remarked that they have incorporated "more common dishes so that people can recognize them" (ED7). Another interviewee (ED4) noted that only Chileans frequent their restaurant, describing their cuisine as "simpler and saltier," resulting in a lack of Korean diners.

Figure 2. Hansik contrast
Figura 2. Contraste hansik

Source: author's photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

The tendency to "Chileanize" preparations is criticized by some interviewees, who assert that their restaurants aim to "deliver the un-Chileanized flavor" (ED5) and "maintain the Korean taste and preparation" (ED2), emphasizing appropriate amounts of seasoning, salt, spice, and sweetness according to Korean standards. They also critique the presentation of dishes, noting that some restaurants "do not present all the elements, but rather combine everything on one plate" (ED5), neglecting the configuration of bapsang. Moreover, they question fusion restaurants (ED2) that do not offer any traditional cuisine, as they tend to confuse diners.

Another aspect that differentiates the preparations is the type of customer, who may have aversions or preferences for certain dishes. One interviewee mentioned that there are dishes they only offer to their Korean clientele because they tend to generate disgust among non-Koreans, such as pork backbone soup (ED8). Another interviewee indicated that the preparations in the neighborhood differ from those currently made in South Korea due to Western influence and openness on the peninsula. In contrast, those cooking in Chile often retain traditional flavors from the 1980s (ED10), the period during which they migrated from Korea. Moreover, dishes typically considered street food in Korea, such as tteokbokki, are served in restaurants in Patronato (ED10).

Figure 3. Tteokbokki on plate
Figura 3. Tteokbokki en plato

Source: author's photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

Additionally, one interviewee (ED7) highlighted the transformation in the perception of Koreans in Chile. Upon arrival, he experienced a sense of strangeness and received curious looks, often being mistaken for a Chinese person, which annoyed him. However, over time, he has observed a significant change: "It has become commonplace to see foreigners here, and now people ask about our origins" (ED7) even expressing excitement upon learning that he is Korean. He attributes this shift, in part, to the influence of K-pop and K-dramas, which have helped raise awareness of Korean culture, igniting Chileans' curiosity to learn more about it.

Although the restaurant owners do not possess formal culinary education, they have experience in the kitchen, primarily stemming from familial knowledge and everyday practice. A key point is sourcing the necessary ingredients; most purchase fruits and vegetables at La Vega and seasonings at the K-markets in Patronato. In some cases, they import ingredients directly from South Korea, primarily for seasoning dishes and, in certain instances, vacuum-sealed meats. Another notable aspect of Korean cuisine is the variety of dishes that can be prepared due to the abundance of seaweeds and fish from the three coasts of the Korean peninsula. In contrast, in Chile, they find only some of these ingredients, which limits their preparations to what is available.

They also mention that each dish tells a story, and each region has its specialties, so the origin of the cook

influences their seasoning and sonmat (: "hand taste"), which refers to the personal touch in cooking (ED4). One interviewee stated that preparing various dishes is "a way to travel through the country (South Korea) without being there" (ED10). Another important aspect is that each restaurant features special or exclusive dishes, such as bone broth or pork backbone soup, based on traditional family recipes passed down through oral tradition. Another interviewee noted that Korean dishes represent a "blend of tradition, flavors, and knowledge" (ED2).

The interviewees described the structure of Korean meals as communal, with no starters or main courses, and no individual plates except for rice, which balances the strong flavors of side dishes. One participant explained that this stems from the hardships of famine due to wars in Korea, leading to simplified, shared meals. Korean cuisine is fundamentally communal, with rice playing a central role alongside kimchi, banchan, and soup. They emphasized the variety of these elements, as well as the healthiness of Korean food compared to the overly salty Chilean dishes. However, they expressed appreciation for Chilean *cazuela* and seafood for their similarity to Korean preparations.

The interviewees also noted that their clientele initially consisted mainly of Korean diaspora members and a few curious Chileans. However, since the pandemic, there has been a significant increase in non-Korean diners, which they attribute to the influence of K-drama and K-pop trends, popularized on platforms like Instagram. One interviewee summarized the shift as a "desire to experience" what they see in Korean media, prompting people to try Korean food (ED7).

Foodies

This section presents the findings from Chilean foodies who were selected through social media based on their content related to Korean cuisine. Three interviews were conducted. The first interviewee, a content creator focusing on Asian food, expressed interest in Korean culture through series, films, and K-pop. She described Korean cuisine as "spicy with a mix of many flavors and textures," highlighting its "beautiful and healthy presentations" (CCH1). Although she has visited more restaurants in the eastern part of Santiago, she recounted an experience in Patronato where she tried tteokbokki, which she disliked due to its "chewy" texture and lack of flavour (CCH1). She also mentioned that "the taste is different" when eating with chopsticks instead of a fork, asserting that eating is a way to understand a culture (CCH1).

The second interviewee CCH2, also a content creator, discovered Patronato through a family member who is a fan of K-pop. She fell in love with Korean food from her first visit, although she initially disliked the seasonings

and spice. During the pandemic, she attempted to cook Korean dishes by following YouTube videos but faced difficulties due to her fear of the flavors and aversion to seafood. After the pandemic, she began visiting Patronato monthly with friends and their children, who enjoy the food. She describes Korean cuisine as varied and healthy, noting that it has helped her "reconcile with eating" after experiencing eating disorders. She observed that non-Korean establishments employ Korean elements, such as K-pop and merchandising, to attract customers, reflecting a "Korean boom" and the idealization of individuals with "slanted eyes." In addition to the food, she is interested in K-pop, Korean series, and K-beauty, particularly skincare.

The third interviewee CCH3, a content creator and former resident of South Korea, became familiar with Korean culture during her stay. Initially, she found it challenging to adjust to the food, describing it as having "super strange flavors." She highlights that Korean cuisine is "an acquired taste," especially kimchi, which she describes as "fermented, sour, and difficult to describe". She also mentions that traditional Korean food has strong smells and appears less appealing compared to sushi. However, she acknowledges that the popularity of Korean pop culture has increased interest in the cuisine, as "there is always a reference in pop culture that leads one to try the food". From her experience in Patronato, she opines that the food in these restaurants is similar to that in South Korea and that traditional food "tries to be authentic, without too much fusion", although it is adjusted to the Chilean palate: "less spicy and saltier". She notes that, with the boom in Korean cuisine since 2012, there are many more restaurants, some targeting Chilean clientele and others catering to Koreans.

Nostalgic eating

The following section will present the results from the Korean diners. The first interviewee, who has been in Chile for a decade, mentioned that upon arrival, he frequently visited Patronato due to the lack of culinary diversity and the stress of adapting. Although he now prefers to cook at home for reasons of cost and safety, he goes to Patronato to shop at Korean supermarkets. He perceives a generational shift in the neighborhood's businesses, transitioning from textile shops to restaurants. Moreover, he highlights an increase in interest in Korean culture since the pandemic, driven by K-dramas and access to Korean products (CCO1).

The second interviewee CCO2, who has been in Chile for almost two years, used to eat out frequently in South Korea. In Chile, he prefers to dine in restaurants of various ethnicities or cook at home with ingredients from Korean or Chinese supermarkets due to the high cost of eating out. He takes pride in Patronato's recognition for its restaurants and shops but believes that the area could benefit from greater investment to improve its environment, following the example of corporate social responsibility in South Korea. However, he was surprised by the

area's uncleanliness, contrasting it with his home country, where there exists a culture of social responsibility in which restaurant and business owners collaborate to enhance the neighborhood's atmosphere. This may be because, although Koreans in Patronato feel acknowledged, they do not wish to be a nuisance and limit their efforts to keeping their restaurants clean. Nevertheless, they feel uncomfortable with the external environment, which is affected by homelessness and theft, and they emphasize the importance of creating a pleasant atmosphere within their establishments to counteract this reality (ED1, ED5, ED7). This interviewee also observes that many new restaurants in Patronato are capitalizing on the "Korean boom" and do not always offer quality food, although some do provide good quality that resembles dishes in South Korea. He recognizes that flavors in Korean cuisine can vary by city or restaurant, which could apply to the restaurants in Patronato. Lastly, he notes that the global Korean wave encompasses more than just K-pop, including food, series, films, education, and technology.

Figure 4. K-market showcase
Figura 4. Mostrador en K-market

Source: author's photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

The first second-generation Korean interviewee in Chile, a resident of Patronato, comments that initially, Korean restaurants were frequented only by the Korean community, but recently they have opened up to Chileans, while still maintaining a division between both groups of diners (CCOCH1). She indicates that the dishes are adjusted to the Chileans' tolerance for spiciness, whereas the Korean community prefers higher levels of heat. She also mentions "seasonal dishes" that depend on the availability of ingredients. For instance, in Korea, it is common to consume all parts of the pig, and a restaurant in Chile offered pork roast exclusively for Koreans (CCOCH1). Preparations in Chile rely on imported ingredients, which sometimes do not arrive on time, affecting the planning of dishes. She also notes that she rarely visits Korean restaurants except for family events or to enjoy something specific, such as fried chicken (CCOCH1). She prefers cooking at home and shopping at Korean supermarkets, although these places now attract many K-pop fans, leading to long queues. To avoid this, her family purchases in bulk. She observes that Korean restaurants typically have names that are accessible to Chilean or other nationality customers, while Korean supermarkets have names that are more familiar to the Korean community. She describes how, during the pandemic, although there was a surge in Korean series, xenophobia and discrimination against the Korean community also increased, as they were often mistaken for Chinese. Additionally, she believes that K-pop is designed for a Western audience, offering a Westernized view of Korean culture. She acknowledges that after the pandemic, the queues at Korean restaurants and supermarkets have increased (CCOCH1).

The second Korean interviewee, born in Chile, lives in the eastern sector of Santiago, and her family owns a business in Patronato, so she has always been connected to the area. She emphasizes that Korean cuisine focuses on unique textures and flavors that are often difficult to explain, and she mentions the challenge of obtaining certain ingredients in Chilean supermarkets. Many cooks order products for delivery from specialized shops (CCOCH2). She highlights the difference in the significance of gastronomy in Chile compared to South Korea, where food plays a more visible and meaningful role in society, with an emphasis on nutritional value and the balance of ingredients. The presentation of dishes and the infrastructure of restaurants in South Korea are meticulously attended to. Additionally, she notes that fermentation and other Korean cooking methods contribute to more complex and savory flavors (CCOCH2). Regarding her personal experience, she recounts the cultural shock of attending a Chilean school after growing up in the Korean community. She felt different, especially when bringing Korean lunches that her classmates considered strange and smelly. She has also received complaints about the smells from cooking in her apartment, which has led her to reduce this activity to avoid inconveniencing her neighbors (CCOCH2).

Intercultural reception and spatial politics

Before turning to the sensory and aesthetic dimensions of Korean food in Patronato, it is essential to consider how diners experience these spaces. Korean and Chilean customers approach restaurants with distinct expectations. Among Koreans, perceptions vary by generation and gender. First-generation migrants often seek continuity, valuing taste, language, and ritual. For them, restaurants function as sites of cultural memory. Second-generation Koreans, especially younger adults, engage with Korean cuisine more flexibly, embracing hybridity. Gender also shapes perception; some women emphasized ambiance and presentation, while others prioritized speed or practicality.

Chilean diners bring their own frameworks. While some read dishes like bibimbap as healthy or trendy, others find strong flavors or textures—fermentation, spice—challenging. These reactions reflect broader cultural codes around taste and novelty. The design of the space plays a key role in shaping these responses. Elements like lighting, decor, background music, and tableware contribute to an atmosphere that blends tradition and modernity. Kitchen visibility and the presence of Korean or Chilean cooks influence perceptions of authenticity and authority.

The restaurant is not a neutral setting. Interior design, stainless-steel chopsticks, shared banchan, and Korean signage help stage a particular cultural narrative. Open kitchens highlight craftsmanship and transparency, while cooks' gestures and language shape diners' impressions. These material and performative details turn the restaurant into a curated scene where food, labor, and aesthetics converge to create a specific intercultural experience.

Figure 5. Korean restaurant sign in Rio de Janeiro Street with Sagrado Corazon, Patronato
Figura 5. Cartel de restaurant corean restaurant ubicado en calle Río de Janeiro y Sagrado Corazón, en Patronato

Source: author's photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

Korean gastronomic aesthetics in Patronato

The gastronomic experience engages the perceptive abilities of both cooks and diners, including the senses of smell, taste, and touch, alongside the preparation and presentation of food. To establish a gastronomic aesthetic (Perullo, 2011), it is necessary to analyze: i) the raw materials used in cooking, ii) the cooking process, and iii) the elements that shape the aesthetic experience of the diner.

Regarding Perullo's first point, a parallel can be drawn with Volli's (2022) semantic model of *inventio*. Here, the definition of what is edible arises from Korean tradition and globalization, popularizing coffee and sweets, which has led to the emergence of Korean cafes in Patronato. Ingredients are sourced from La Vega, k-markets, and sometimes imported from South Korea, with fermentation—evident in kimchi—being a distinctive feature of Korean cuisine.

Perullo's second point aligns with Volli's (2022) *dispositio* concerning meal planning. Korean restaurants in Patronato serve dishes from noon until closing, while cafes provide sweets, sandwiches, and coffee throughout their hours. Notably, sweet and savory options are presented simultaneously, catering to breakfast, lunch, "once" (a light meal), and dinner.

A notable aspect of Patronato restaurants is the inclusion of Korean street food, such as tteokbokki, on their

menus. In food preparation, creativity and technique (Perullo, 2011) manifest through a variety of sonmat 손맛 in each establishment, influenced by the ingredients available in Chile. Korean cuisine in Patronato also accommodates varying levels of spiciness, ranging from non-spicy to medium. Some restaurants adjust their recipes by adding more salt or sugar, creating a distinction between those who prepare food traditionally and those who modify their flavors for non-Korean palates. This aspect also defines *elocutio* (Volli, 2022), as cooks consider their diners' preferences. Restaurant owners highlight the complexity and variety of cooking techniques while acknowledging the need to adapt to available ingredients in Chile.

The third point of analysis concerns the dining experience, linking to Volli's (2022) concepts of *elocutio*, *actio*, and *memoria*. Some restaurants serve banchan, while others do not. Although traditional Korean meals do not distinguish between a starter and a main course, banchan often functions as a starter in these settings. The dishes aim for a balance of colors and textures. Notably, menu descriptions differentiate between shared dishes, individual portions, and vegetarian or vegan options, departing from traditional Korean norms of sharing everything except one's rice, thus accommodating diners' dietary preferences. *Tteokbokki*'s role as a street food transitioning into a main dish for non-Korean diners is particularly intriguing. Similar trends occur with other dishes that overshadow rice's central position in the bapsang. One interviewee criticized that not all *bapsang* elements are served, with everything instead combined on one plate (ED5).

In *elocutio*, it is evident how diners influence both the cooking and presentation of dishes. Restaurants maintaining traditional Korean flavors and *bapsang* structure tend to attract more Korean diners. In contrast, those appealing mainly to non-Koreans offer simpler, saltier cuisine. A notable distinction exists regarding special dishes offered solely to Korean clientele, knowing they may evoke rejection or disgust (Rozin & Fallon, 1980) among other diners.

A fundamental aspect of *actio* is the sensory process of tasting new or familiar flavors. In the case of Korean cuisine, the complexity of its preparations is reflected in its flavors and textures, which may seem foreign at first. Disgust (Rozin & Fallon, 1980) helps to understand and describe the experience of those trying steamed *mandu*, *kimchi*, or *tteokbokki* for the first time. The first time I ate *kimchi*, I felt a tingling in my lips as a signal of rejection to the spiciness, as I am not accustomed to eating it. When I tried medium-spicy *tteokbokki*, I felt a burning sensation on my tongue and itchiness in my throat. Even Latin American waitresses have warned me about the textures of certain dishes, like *japchae*, before bringing them to my table. However, by enduring the physical discomfort and trying these preparations again, I was able to better

appreciate the complexity of their flavors. *Kimchi* was not only spicy but also sour and slightly sweet, with a mix of freshness and warmth. *Japchae*, with its elasticity and softness, may seem chewy and strange at first, but it also offers a unique sweetness that contrasts with the vegetables or proteins.

The *actio* in Korean restaurants includes decoration, music, and television. There are two main categories of Korean restaurants: those with separate tables for each group and those with large, shared tables, although they do not necessarily encourage interaction among diners. Some restaurants have open kitchens, allowing diners to observe the preparation of dishes and the interaction between cooks and waitstaff.

Figure 6. Personal belongings in the restaurant
Figura 6. Objetos personales en el restaurant

Source: author's photography. Fuente: fotografía de la autora.

In all Korean restaurants and cafes in Patronato, Korean music is played, primarily K-pop. Although the owners prefer other genres, they know that K-pop attracts their diners and staff. Before opening or when closing, they often play the music they enjoy to accompany their work. In some restaurants, the second floor or backyard is the owners' home, which they decorate with personal items. Examples include a *hanbok* (traditional Korean dress) belonging to the owner's daughter or a *kendo* uniform from

another restaurant's owner. Traditional wedding dolls and gifts brought from Korea by friends can also be seen.

Television also plays an important role, showing K-pop videos or Korean programs, creating a homely atmosphere for the owners and establishing a private space at specific moments. Focused on the diners, some restaurants display images of K-pop singers, and certain cafes sell merchandise from idols. As a post-meal act, some owners mention that diners, especially younger ones, say goodbye or thank them in Korean as they leave.

The last step of Volli's (2022) food rhetoric is *memoria*, and it is worth reiterating that Korean restaurants usually have names that are accessible or easier for non-Korean diners to recognize so that they can remember them. On the other hand, the decorative elements of the restaurants invite the curiosity of the diners, as they often take photos. They also take pictures of the dishes or record the entire *actio* to upload to social media, just as I did with all the meals I tried in the context of this research.

In the case of K-food and the K-diet in Patronato, restaurant owners value the nutritional aspects of Korean food but do not always manage to reflect them in all their preparations. This is due to the limited variety of ingredients available in Chile and the preferences of non-Korean diners, who often prefer more salt or fried options. According to the distinction by Kim et al. (2016), the Korean gastronomy in Patronato would not fully fit into the K-diet, and it is debatable whether it can be considered K-food. I propose to talk about a multiterritorial gastronomic aesthetic that weaves relationships between territories and connects material and symbolic aspects, configuring a Korean gastronomic culture unique to Patronato.

It is important to recognize the variety of preparations and the intentions behind them, whether to maintain a connection with traditional Korean cuisine or to adapt to the non-Korean, Chilean, or Latin American palate. Furthermore, the experience of traditional Korean cuisine is not homogeneous, as there are different recipes and particular flavors across the Korean peninsula, and the time since migration also affects traditional knowledge and flavors. In this context, the gastronomy of Patronato leans more towards being K-food: an adapted Korean food that fuses material and symbolic elements from its culture of origin with its new environment.

Conclusions

The research shows how food functions as memory work, aesthetic performance, and diplomatic tool. In line with Mannur (2007), dishes such as kimchi jjigae and bibimbap act less as replicas of a "homeland cuisine" and more as affective bridges that let migrants re-imagine home in

Santiago. Parasecoli (2014) reminds us that these sensory experiences are always mediated by cultural knowledge and social context; restaurateurs in Patronato mobilize plating, décor, and service to speak simultaneously to Korean nostalgia and Chilean curiosity. Framed as everyday gastrodiplomacy (Rockower, 2012), such choices—tweaking spice, offering forks alongside metal chopsticks, staging open kitchens—help translate hansik for new publics while soft-powering a positive image of Korea.

This continuous negotiation between authenticity and adaptation also embodies Haesbert's (2011) idea of multi-territoriality: diners move, in one sitting, between Seoul and Santiago. Some restaurants keep court-style service with individual rice bowls and multiple banchan; others fuse elements into single-plate formats. Generational and gendered differences surface in these preferences, with first-generation Koreans valuing ritual continuity and younger diners seeking hybrid options.

Media flows amplify the process. K-dramas and K-pop have turned what was once an ethnic niche into a mainstream draw, especially after the pandemic lockdowns. The result is a new legitimacy for Korean food: previously exoticized flavors are now framed as healthy, trendy, even comforting.

In short, Korean gastronomy in Patronato has moved from curiosity to cornerstone. Restaurants operate as multiterritorial hubs where taste, space, and performance intertwine—serving both the diasporic need for cultural continuity and the local appetite for novel experiences. This evolution highlights how culinary practice can anchor migrant identities, reshape urban foodscapes, and extend soft power far beyond national borders.

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