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*Food Science*



## THE ORIGINS OF THAILAND'S GASTRODIPLOMACY

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### Abstract

Apart from serving as one of the most fundamental elements for survival and satisfaction, food can be used as a diplomatic tool for projecting a particular country's unique culture and identity to the foreign public in order to create better brand recognition of a nation and extend its soft power abroad. This refers to gastro diplomacy. Since there are only a few researches about Thailand's gastrodiplomacy and none of them theoretically mentions the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate this foreign policy in the first place, the article aims to study Thailand's gastrodiplomacy, namely "Thailand: Kitchen of the World" and "Global Thai". To fill the academic gap in the existing literature, the article seeks to investigate the research question "what factors influence Thailand to initiate gastrodiplomacy in the first place?". This research will apply a qualitative method based on documentary analysis. To construct a theoretical framework, constructivism will be employed as an approach to analyzing the key puzzles behind Thailand's gastrodiplomacy. The findings found that three main factors, namely the narratives of nation branding, a negative image of sex tourism, and an economic policy, are the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate gastrodiplomacy in the first place.

**Keywords:** Thailand, Gastrodiplomacy, Nation branding, Constructivism

### Introduction

In people's daily lives, food has played a crucial role in serving their basic needs for survival and satisfaction. Most people tend to overlook the role of food by only perceiving it as a meal to fulfill their empty stomachs and serve their needs. In fact, the power of food not only lies in the realm of fundamental elements for survival, but it can also be employed as a diplomatic instrument for projecting a particular country's unique culture and identity to the foreign public with the aims of creating better brand recognition and increasing soft power abroad. This refers to gastrodiplomacy. Even though the way food has played a crucial role in international relations is not something new, the term "gastrodiplomacy" is quite new in the field of diplomacy. As a form of public diplomacy, gastrodiplomacy is the way a state uses national cuisine as a medium to communicate and project its culinary culture to foreign audiences in order to construct a desirable image, gain a better reputation, and increase its brand recognition at the global level (Rockower, 2012). As noted by Forman and Sonenshine (2014), mixed with the unique culture and identity of a country, food is considered a powerful ingredient in diplomacy and international relations. Therefore, the study of gastrodiplomacy is greatly interesting because it highlights the significance of food in terms of a diplomatic function provided with a modern form of public diplomacy. Especially, there are only a few researches on this topic including the case of Thailand and it tends to be overlooked in the field of political science.

Nowadays, there are many countries around the world that have been employing gastrodiplomacy in their foreign policy as a means to stand out from the crowd and gain international recognition by promoting their nation brand through national cuisine. Thailand has discovered the potential of using Thai cuisine as a soft power tool and introduced it to the international arena in 2002.



Thai cuisine is fairly unique, exclusive, and distinct from other countries owing to its long history of blending indigenous food with Indian and Chinese culinary influence. The country then utilizes this culinary heritage to promote its nation brand and increase international influence. Surprisingly, Thailand is recognized as the first country in the world that officially pursues gastrodiplomacy in its foreign policy. In 2002, Thai government established the first program called “Global Thai” with the aim of increasing the number of Thai restaurants abroad in order to increase the global demand for Thai food products and internationalize Thai cuisine (Ichijo & Ranta, 2018). This campaign provides an opportunity for the country to internationally promote Thai food, create a recognizable nation brand, and expand its soft power abroad (Rockower, 2012). Afterwards, the Thai government launched a second project named “Thailand: Kitchen of the World” with the goals of educating both Thais and foreigners about Thai culinary culture and its history as a means to raise global awareness of Thai cuisine, one of its respective cultures. Under gastrodiplomacy projects, the government held several seminars to encourage Thai investors to invest in overseas Thai restaurants and provided a huge amount of the budget for the projects. The government also established Thai cooking schools to train Thai chefs to work abroad. Moreover, it provided financial loans to the overseas Thai restaurants and created a business link between the overseas Thai restaurants and domestic food industry (Sunanta, 2005). Since the establishment of gastrodiplomacy campaigns, there has been an increase in the number of overseas Thai restaurants from 5,500 in 2001 to 13,000 in 2008 (Park et al., 2019). Today, Thailand is considered a successful and well-known country in the field of gastrodiplomacy. Thai food has prominently gained popularity among foreigners. This later inspires other countries to jump on this bandwagon. Nevertheless, there are only a few researches about the case of Thailand, and especially the key factors influencing the country to initiate gastrodiplomacy in the first place. This research then intends to shed light on the key puzzles behind Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy by placing an emphasis on the origins of this policy.

### **Research Objective(s)**

The research aims to Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy and seeks to analyze the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate gastrodiplomacy in the first place by placing a huge emphasis on the origins of the policy.

### **Literature Review**

There are two main sets of literature that have been reviewed for this research. The first one will discuss the concept of gastrodiplomacy by investigating definitions of the term and its functions provided by many scholars to have a comprehensive understanding of what gastrodiplomacy is and how it is different from other kinds of diplomacy related to food. Then, the second one will be a review of existing literature about Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy, which could be elaborated as follows:

#### **1. The concept of gastrodiplomacy**

Since the research aims to study Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy, this section will shed light on the concept of gastrodiplomacy so as to have a clear understanding of what gastrodiplomacy is and how it is different from the other types of diplomacy related to food. Before investigating definitions of the term and its functions, it should be clarified that gastrodiplomacy is not the only form of diplomacy related to the use of food. There are many types of diplomacy related to food such as food diplomacy, culinary diplomacy, and gastrodiplomacy. Rockover (2012) believed that even though these types of diplomacy are relevant to the use of food as a diplomatic instrument, they are different in terms of objectives and implementations. To illustrate, food diplomacy is the use of food aid at the time of a crisis to eliminate global hunger instead of aiming to promote the country’s culinary culture.



The culinary diplomacy is how states use culinary delights and dining experiences as a diplomatic instrument to strengthen bilateral ties and formal diplomacy at the government-to-government level for diplomatic achievements such as a visit among heads of state and ambassadors. In contrast, gastrodiploamacy is a form of public diplomacy used by a state, in collaboration with non-state actors such as private companies, to communicate and project its culinary culture to wider foreign audiences, including individuals rather than high-level elites, with the aims of enhancing its nation brand and raising global awareness of its own culture (Rockower, 2012). For Rockower, a well-known scholar in the field of public diplomacy and gastrodiploamacy, these types of diplomacy are different in terms of targets, purposes, and functions, while some scholars, like Chapple-Sokol (2013) from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, believe that the terms “gastrodiploamacy” and “culinary diplomacy” are similar and can be used interchangeably.

The term “gastrodiploamacy” was first coined and conceptualized by Paul Rockower. Rockower (2012) defined the term in his article titled *“Recipes for gastrodiploamacy”* as a form of public diplomacy used by the state to win hearts and minds of the foreign public through national cuisine. The culinary delights of a country can be used as a powerful instrument to conduct public diplomacy for achieving certain goals it pursues. By introducing and promoting its national cuisine to the world, the country will be able to raise global awareness of its culture, enhance nation branding, and extend its soft power abroad. Solleh (2015) added that gastrodiploamacy can also generate possible economic and political gains such as trade growth and economic contributions. Nirwandy and Awang (2014), in their article *“Conceptualizing Public Diplomacy Social Convention Culinary: Engaging Gastro Diplomacy Warfare for Economic Branding”*, similarly defined gastrodiploamacy as a subfield of public diplomacy where soft power becomes a powerful tool in diplomacy. It provides a platform for the state to engage with wider foreign audiences and gain international reputation for its culinary culture while constructing a desirable image and increasing brand recognition at the global level. Ruddy (2014), in an article titled *“Hearts, Minds, and Stomachs: Gastrodiploamacy and the Potential of National Cuisine in Changing Public Perception of National Image”*, also provided a definition of gastrodiploamacy as a branch of cultural public diplomacy in which the state uses its national cuisines to change public perceptions in order to improve its national image and promote itself on the world stage. Thereby, gastrodiploamacy is considered a strategy that allows the states to raise global awareness of their respective culture, increase nation brand recognition, extend soft power abroad, and achieve other goals they pursue through the promotion of national cuisines.

In the context of gastrodiploamacy, Rockower (2012) mentioned that food or cuisine is transformed as a medium to generate emotional engagement across language barriers, which can positively change public perceptions toward that country and its image. Wilson (2011) elaborated on this emotional connection by noting that, when people experience the national food of one country through their senses (smell, sight, touch, and taste), they will remember the food they eat, the sensation they feel, and their perceptions toward that country and its image. It is not only about eating but also about experiencing the newfound culture and identity of one’s country through its national cuisine. Mennell (1995) and Zhang (2015) also mentioned that the styles of cooking, table setting, dining etiquette, and everything on the table can actually give a deep insight into one’s country. They can provide a clearer picture of a country’s culture and identity. According to a famous quote by Brillat-Savarin (2011), in his book titled *“The physiology of taste”*, “tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are”, the national cuisine both represents and reflects the identity of one’s country. Brillat-Savarin (2011) mentioned that the uniqueness of national cuisine can define the identity of a particular country. It allows the country to distinguish itself from others and stand out from the crowd so that it will not be overshadowed by other countries e.g. South Korea will not be misunderstood as



Japan. With the distinctive flavors of national cuisine, gastrodiploamcy allows the country to distinguish itself, create a recognizable nation brand and positively change public perceptions toward its image (Rockower, 2014). When foreigners experience the national food of one's country, it will bring them with a newfound respect of one's cuisine, culture, and hopefully a country (Chapple-Sokol, 2013; Alhinnawi, 2011). Rockower (2014) noted in his article that "to taste us is to love us". The more people taste the cuisine of one country, the more that country will be known and desired. Therefore, food not only fills people's empty stomachs, it can be utilized by the states as a non-threatening and powerful method to influence the foreign public, raise global awareness of its culture, further its nation brand status, and improve the country's image at the international level.

## **2. The existing literature about Thailand's gastrodiploamcy**

Suntikul (2007), in her article titled "*Gastrodiploamcy in tourism*", described how national cuisine has played a significant role in public diploamcy as a powerful instrument to enhance nation branding and increase soft power abroad. The author believed that gastrodiploamcy allows the state to win the hearts and minds of the foreign public by creating a positive cultural engagement without traveling abroad, thereby raising global awareness of its own culture and increasing international recognition. In the case of Thailand, the Thai government launched the two projects in 2002, namely "Global Thai" and "Thailand: Kitchen of the World". Under the "Global Thai" program, the country aims to enlarge the number of overseas Thai restaurants in order to globally promote Thai food, one of its respective cultures, and create a recognizable nation brand. Then, the "Thailand: Kitchen of the World" campaign was launched in the same year to inform both domestic and foreign audiences about Thai cuisine and its history. Moreover, the two projects are intended to stimulate the country's tourism sector. This is because when foreigners eat or experience Thai food overseas, they tend to visit Thailand as a consequence. According to a survey about the influence of national cuisine on the public perceptions of a nation's image, it was found that half of the respondents agreed they change their perceptions of a country when they taste the national food of that country, while almost all respondents agreed that their traveling abroad depends on the destined country's national cuisine. Under these two projects, Thai restaurants abroad have become tourist information centers and the sites of Thailand's gastrodiploamcy.

Sunanta (2005), who published an article "*The globalization of Thai cuisine*", also mentioned Thailand's gastrodiploamcy. The author mostly described how Thai cuisine has become globalized and internationally promoted by the Thai government through its gastrodiploamcy project, the Kitchen of the World. In the past, Thai cuisine was not widely known outside of the country. It has become well-known among foreigners since the Vietnam War. Since then, Thai cuisine has rapidly gained popularity among foreigners and has been promoted by the Thai government through its gastrodiploamcy project. Under the gastrodiploamcy project, the government aims to increase the number of overseas Thai restaurants by encouraging both Thai investors and businessmen to invest in overseas Thai restaurants and Thai food industry, providing Thai chef training to work abroad, and giving financial assistance to the restaurant owners. Sunanta (2005) also noted that the Thai government has pursued gastrodiploamcy because it hopes that the project will generate foreign income from the export of food and agricultural products, thereby resulting in economic contributions to the country. Moreover, the author believed that the internationalization of Thai food and Thai tourism are interrelated because Thai food has played a crucial role in promoting the tourism sector. The slogan "Amazing Thailand", a part of the Thai tourism campaign in 1998, suggested that eating Thai food overseas would offer the same experience as visiting Thailand. By globalizing Thai food under the gastrodiploamcy project, both Thai government and business sectors have played a significant role in shaping the way that Thai cuisine has been promoted in the international arena. This



process is then market-driven by selling Thai culinary culture to foreigners, which later helps to generate economic contributions and stimulate tourism to the country.

Like the previous articles, Park, Kim, and Yeoman (2019), in their book titled “*Food tourism in Asia*”, mentioned the case of Thailand and its key objectives in pursuing gastrodiplomacy. The authors also noted the diplomatic role of Thai food in enhancing the country’s nation branding. Thailand is one of the countries that has successfully implemented gastrodiplomacy by making Thai food known globally. The country has engaged in gastrodiplomacy in order to enhance its nation branding and promote its culinary culture on a global scale. The two projects, “Global Thai” and “Thailand: Kitchen of the World”, have been established in order to raise awareness of Thai culture among foreigners, enhance nation branding, and make Thailand a leading food export country by increasing the global demand for Thai food products. Moreover, these projects stimulate foreigners to experience Thai food directly in Thailand, thereby leading to a huge number of tourists visiting the country. The overseas Thai restaurants have participated in the campaign by serving as tourist information centers. The government has pursued the policies in the way that internationally promotes Thai food to be known abroad, enhances economic contributions of food exports, and brands Thailand as a food-centric destination.

Ichijo and Ranta (2018), in their book “*Food, national identity and nationalism from everyday to global politics*”, also pointed out how national cuisine has played a crucial role in international relations under the concept of gastrodiplomacy. National cuisine has commonly been employed as a diplomatic instrument to promote the country’s culture in the global arena and pursue diplomatic goals such as extending soft power. As a soft power resource, the national food can be used by the states to influence and attract foreign actors to achieve the goals they pursue. Thailand has implemented gastrodiplomacy since 2002. The Thai government initiated this diplomacy in order to enhance its nation branding, expand soft power overseas, and attract foreigners to visit Thailand. Under gastrodiplomacy, the Thai government has attempted to increase the number of overseas Thai restaurants by providing loans, creating a business link between overseas Thai restaurants and domestic food industry, and establishing Thai cooking schools to train Thai chefs to work abroad. In addition, Ichijo and Ranta (2018) exposed that, actually Thai food policy is an important idea behind the projects because the Thai government desires to connect the promotion of Thailand and its culture with an expansion in the Thai food industry.

Therefore, it could be seen that all of these existing literatures about Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy mostly look at the diplomatic role of Thai food, the key objectives of Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy, and how the policy has been promoted by the Thai government. Nevertheless, none of them theoretically mentions the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate this policy in the first place. They only emphasize the overall projects and the country’s main objectives in pursuing this foreign policy. Hence, the key problem in the existing literatures is that they largely pay attention to the policy implementations and objectives without considering the origins of Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy. In consequence, this research aims to fill the academic gap in the existing literature by emphasizing the origins of the policy in order to investigate “what factors influence Thailand to pursue gastrodiplomacy in the first place”. To clarify, this research will provide three important factors that cause Thailand to pursue gastrodiplomacy, namely: (1) the narratives of nation branding; (2) a negative image of sex tourism; and (3) an economic policy. Even though the existing literature already mentions that Thai food policy is a crucial idea behind gastrodiplomacy, the research argues that only an economic factor is not sufficient. Rather than a purely economic factor, the three factors combined together, derived from a constructivist perspective, are the key puzzles behind Thailand’s gastrodiplomacy. This will be illustrated in the following section.



## **Theoretical framework**

In order to build a theoretical framework, the research applies constructivism as an approach to analyzing the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate gastrodiploacy in its foreign policy. Different theories provide different ideas, frameworks, perspectives, and assumptions about particular issues. Although constructivism does not address the key issues in international relations or provide solutions like other IR theories, it still provides an alternative understanding of certain core issues in international relations, such as the role of norms, the significance of ideas, and the relationships between state identity and state interest, which can impact state behavior including the conduct of foreign policy. Some of these issues are overlooked by other mainstream IR theories, the constructivists then come to problematize what is neglected and provide an alternative framework to make sense of the complex world, including foreign policy formulation. Therefore, constructivism is considerably useful and suitable for this research because it places a huge emphasis on ideas, norms, identity, and interests, which could be considered the significant factors influencing Thailand to conduct gastrodiploacy.

According to Finnemore and Sikkink (2001), well-known constructivists, the world is socially constructed. It cannot be understood only through material factors but also through ideational ones. The objectivity of material factors is acknowledged, but it only becomes meaningful through shared ideas and knowledge among the actors. The constructivists then pay more attention to non-material factors like ideas, beliefs, identity, norms, and culture in the context of intersubjective or shared understandings. As narrated by Alexander Wendt (1992), an American political scientist and a famous constructivist scholar, shared ideas significantly matter because they are the main factor that determines and constructs state identity and interests, which later shape how the state acts and performs. The identities and interests of actors are not predetermined by nature. They are socially constructed by shared ideas, knowledge, common expectations, and collective understandings through social interaction between the actors in the international community (Meng, 2020). The state identity will imply the state interests, and the state interests will inform the choice of actions. Moreover, it should be noted that in order to understand the constitution of state identity and interests, one should look at not only what states act in international relations but also historical, cultural, and social contexts. These factors play an important role in constructing state identity in the first place (Wendt, 1992).

In addition to relations between state identity and state interests, the constructivists also shed light on relations between national image and state identity. Through the constructivist lens, the national image is not a pre-given entity but is socially constructed through the process of interactions between a state (subject) and other states (object) in the international system. The national image involves both the state's self-perceptions and others' perceptions of the state that are gradually constructed and developed through their interactions. Once they have reached mutual understandings and identification, they will determine each other's national identity and image. The negative interactions will generate negative identifications, thereby leading to negative images or misinterpretations of images. Conversely, the positive interactions will encourage the positive sharing of ideas and knowledge, thereby resulting in positive identification and images. Thus, if a country seeks to improve its reputation abroad, it must start by changing its interactions with other countries in order to form new shared ideas and knowledge and create a positive image of the country (Meng, 2020).

Last but not least, the constructivists focus on the relationship between agents and structure as a mutual constitution. While the structure shapes the identity and interests of actors (agents), the actors' actions also influence the structure. As an ideational structure, the global norms or the global



trends both constrain and are constitutive of the identity and interests of the state, as well as its actions. The ideational structure will impact how the state thinks it should act, what limitations are, and what strategies are available for achieving certain goals it desires. The state will follow the norm or trend that is related to its identity by considering whether action is appropriate for it. On the other hand, the state can influence the structure through actions and practices because the structure would not exist without the practices of the actors (Flockhart, 2016).

Grounded by the constructivist approach, the research will focus on the role of global trend, the significance of ideas, national image, state identity, and state interests to investigate how these ideational factors influence Thailand to conduct gastrodiploamacy in its foreign policy. Derived from constructivist perspectives, the research provides three factors that can influence Thailand to pursue gastrodiploamacy in the first place, namely: (1) the narratives of nation branding; (2) a negative image of sex tourism; and (3) an economic policy, which will be explored respectively in the findings section.

## **Methodology**

In doing the research, the researcher applies a qualitative method to investigate what factors influence Thailand to pursue gastrodiploamacy in the first place. The documentary analysis will be used as the main research approach. The facts and data from both primary and secondary sources will be systematically collected and analyzed. The examples of primary sources include the government's official statements and the press releases on the website of the Royal Thai Government. For the secondary sources, the research uses a variety of data including academic journals, books, and newspaper which provide the key information and details related to gastrodiploamacy, and especially the case of Thailand. Also, the research will mention the works of many well-known scholars in the realm of international relations and public diplomacy such as Alexander Wendt, a famous social constructivist, and Paul Rockower, a renowned scholar who coined the term "gastrodiploamacy", to discuss the concept of constructivism and analyze the origins of Thailand's gastrodiploamacy.

## **Results**

The research found that there are three factors influencing Thailand to initiate gastrodiploamacy in the first place namely the narratives of nation branding, a negative image of sex tourism, and an economic policy, which could be elaborated as follows:

### **1. The narratives of nation branding**

Since the ideational structure can influence state identity and its performances in the international arena including the conduct of foreign policy, the global trend that happened before Thailand's gastrodiploamacy should be taken into account. During the late 1990s, there was an increasing level of interest in the narratives of nation branding among academics, especially in the field of marketing and communication, and practitioners. As an emerging new area, the concept of nation branding is in its infancy and has not reached a consensus among scholars yet. The term "nation branding" was first coined in 1996 by Simon Anholt, a British policy advisor and the founder of nation branding (Viktorin et al., 2018). Anholt (2007) defined the term "nation branding" as a strategic and policy-making approach that allows the state to build on its strengths for achieving a better reputation and positive image. Gudjonsson (2005), an Icelandic brand practitioner, similarly defined the term as a means for the state to positively change the attitudes, identity, or image of a nation, in which the national government is considered the initiator of the process. Fan (2006) also provided a definition of the term as a process by which a nation's image can be built, manipulated, and monitored in order to improve the country's international reputation. However, some scholars like



Rendon (2003) and Szondi (2007) believe that the main focus of nation branding is to promote both economic and political interests of a state at home and abroad. Hence, these are some examples of the narratives of nation branding provided by many scholars in the academic field. At that time, the narratives of nation branding did not only grasp the attention from the academics, but also the practitioners like policymakers and national governments.

In the age of globalization, where national image can be built, reversed, monitored, and projected more easily through mass media and communication, many national governments from both developed and developing countries have started to pay attention to the significance of branding a nation. The trend of nation branding was first practiced in the United Kingdom with the British campaign called “Cool Britannia” during the late 1980s and 1990s (Viktorin et al., 2018). At that time, the UK’s image abroad was unfavorable. It was damaged by the outbreak of Mad Cow Disease and the backwardness of the country. The majority of British people no longer had pride in their nation. Then, British marketing experts and policymakers were given a task by the government to rebrand the country’s image. As a result, the campaign “Cool Britannia” was launched to improve the country’s image and reputation by internationally promoting British positive features like arts and music such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, well-known and fantastic British rock brands (Viktorin et al., 2018). In this process, British brand consultants and policymakers are the main advocates of nation branding, which later paves the way for other countries to follow the same path. Since then, nation branding has become a routine policy for national governments in many countries around the world such as France, the United States, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Poland (Ham, 2001).

The nation branding is seen as a phenomenal and unavoidable trend for any country in the globalization era to stand out from the crowd and promote themselves on the global stage. As stated by Anholt, in the world of competing identities, it would be a mistake if a country did not jump on this bandwagon (Viktorin et al., 2018). Thailand is one of the countries influenced by the narratives of nation branding. The trend of nation branding influenced the country to have some collective ideas about self-perception and others’ perceptions towards the country and its image by looking at itself, determining who it is, what position it possesses, and how others see it, and then rebranding a nation the way it desires. Derived from constructivism, the shared ideas and beliefs of government and state officials are extremely significant in determining foreign policy (Grieco et al., 2014). Influenced by the narratives of nation branding and the successful case of the UK, the Thai government and some policymakers shared collective ideas and understandings about branding a nation as a means to improve the country’s image and create better brand recognition. Somkid Jatusripitak, a Deputy Prime Minister of the Thai government, also wrote a book titled “*The Marketing of Nations*” in 1997, which elaborated on his ideas about using marketing techniques to brand a nation. Hence, this could demonstrate that the direction of Thai foreign policy had been influenced by the ideas of nation branding, in which marketing techniques are used to brand the nation. The country has decided to jump on this bandwagon since the early 2000s. In 2001, a branding Thailand project was launched by the Thai government with a collaboration of two business schools, namely the Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration at Chulalongkorn University and the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. This project aims to evaluate Thailand’s brand equity based on consumers’ perceptions toward the country and discover both strengths and weaknesses of the nation in order to have a better understanding of Thailand’s brand positioning (Nuttavuthisit, 2007). In this case, Thai cuisine is found to be one of the most important strengths of the country. With the unique flavors of Thai food and its growing popularity among foreigners, the Thai government launched gastrodiplomacy in 2002 to brand the nation with Thai cuisine under the slogan “Thailand:



Kitchen of the World” by combining Thai identity embedded in national cuisine in the process. Since Thai cuisine both represents and reflects Thai identity, gastrodiploamacy allows Thailand to project its unique culture and identity to foreign audiences and distinguish its nation brand so as to stand out from the crowd e.g. Thailand will not be misunderstood as Vietnam. Through the promotion of national cuisine, the country is allowed to positively change the public perceptions of the country and its image. When foreigners experience Thai food, it will bring them a newfound respect for Thai cuisine, Thai culture, and hopefully a country, hence creating better brand recognition of a nation.

## **2. A negative image of sex tourism**

According to constructivists, historical contexts and ideas play a crucial role in the formation of state identity and national image, which in turn influence state actions, including the conduct of foreign policy. The research then focuses on the historical context and collective ideas that existed before Thailand decided to initiate this policy in 2002. Before investigating the historical context, it should be noted that the issue of image and reputation is very significant when one analyzes a state’s performance in the international arena. The images and reputations of a particular country can both positively and negatively affect that country’s international visibility and its position on the world stage. The country with positive images and remarkable reputations tends to gain more opportunities to participate in the global market and play a leading role in the international arena, while the country with poor images and bad reputations may face several challenges to effectively access the global market, tends to be overshadowed by other countries, and even finds it difficult to climb up its position on the world stage. Therefore, it is not surprising that currently there is an increasing level of interest among the states in improving their own images and reputations at the international level through various kinds of instruments especially soft power, a method that can easily influence people’s daily lives and create a long-term result. Soft power such as national cuisines, arts, music, literature, and other cultural assets has been popularly and apparently employed by many states to stand out from the crowd and internationally promote themselves the way they desire. The more positive images and reputations the countries have, the more they are able to climb up their position on the world stage and effectively participate in the global marketplace.

Thailand has fallen into the same trap in terms of improving its own image that has been damaged by the negative image of sex tourism over the past six decades. The image of Thailand has been associated with sex tourism since the Vietnam War when the U.S. military base was settled in Thailand (Ichijo & Ranta, 2018; Nuttavuthisit, 2007). At that time, American soldiers visited the country and started to crowd the walking streets and go-go bars to search for companionship, experience the nightlife activities, and enjoy the naughty side of it. Many poor and vulnerable women in rural areas, most of whom are underprivileged and uneducated, saw an opportunity to earn a living and provide for their families by working in the sex trade industry. Despite being a well-known country for beautiful beaches and smiling people, Thailand has also been negatively perceived by foreigners as one of the most remarkable destinations for sex tourism and prostitution. According to the Branding Thailand Project, conducted by the Thai government in 2001 as a project to figure out the country’s strengths and weaknesses, one of the most significant issues that places Thailand at a huge disadvantage is the image of sex tourism (Nuttavuthisit, 2007). If someone searches on the internet about the world’s top ten countries related to sex tourism destinations, Thailand will absolutely be listed and negatively mentioned on many websites. Referring to the Association for the Prevention, Reintegration, and Care of Prostituted Women, Thailand is one of the world’s top countries with the highest level of child prostitution. In 2004, child prostitution in the kingdom reached 800,000 under the age of sixteen. And sex tourism is seen as the main factor that intensifies the sexual exploitation of children (Iaccino, 2014). Over the past six decades, the image of sex



tourism destination has created a negative stereotype to the country. Whenever foreigners think about Thailand, it also reminds them the sex industry and prostitution at the same time. When some foreigners have heard about Thailand, they mostly think of Pattaya, a coastal city that is surrounded by beautiful beaches and a lot of brothels. For those who have never been to Thailand, they have seen the country's notorious sex industry on social media and television, leading to a negative impression toward the country. There are several reputable travel guidebooks mentioning Thailand's red light districts (Kusy, 1991). For example, Bangkok is mentioned in the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture book as a city that is notorious for prostitution (Chon et al., 1993). Furthermore, there are many advertisements about Thailand's sex tourism widely published in Europe e.g. the "Thailand Express Sex Tour" names Thailand as "a big brothel" (Hantrakul, 1988). These negative perceptions toward the country have damaged and jeopardized the country's image for a long period of time. The Thai government then has realized the problem and desired to address it seriously.

In order to correct the negative image of sex tourism, the Thai government has made attempts by launching laws and regulations against prostitution while internationally promoting the positive features of the country such as Thai cuisine. It should be noted that prostitution is actually illegal in Thailand. According to the 1996 Prevention and Suppression of Prostitution Act, sex workers are subjected to fines for loitering in public and to fines and imprisonment if they advertise their services or gather at prostitution venues for sex trade (Napatanapong & Saowakhon, 2022). As stated by Rockover (2008), the national image can be built, manipulated, and even changed through marketing techniques. The negative stereotype of a country is not pre-existing but evolving. It can be changed into a positive one by using the branding strategy of a nation. As a result, the Thai government launched gastrodiplomacy with the intention of eliminating the negative image of sex tourism and rebranding the country with positive features like Thai food, one of its respective cultures. Rebranding the country with Thai cuisine under gastrodiplomacy projects allows Thailand to create a positive image of the country and new senses of identity as "the kitchen of the world" and "a leading food export country" instead of a sex tourism destination. In other words, the negative image of sex tourism is the key puzzle behind Thailand's gastrodiplomacy. The Thai government launched gastrodiplomacy in order to suppress and diminish the unfavorable and negative image of sex tourism that it has suffered over the past six decades by replacing it with the positive features like Thai cuisine. Provided with rich history and unique flavors of Thai cuisine, gastrodiplomacy allows Thailand to positively change the public perceptions of the country and create a recognizable image at the international level.

### **3. An economic policy**

As economic policy shaped by state interests can influence a state's performance including foreign policy, the economic factor should also be emphasized. Since the Asian financial crisis exploded in 1997, Thai economy was tremendously vulnerable and severely in a critical condition. All stock markets, currency exchange rates and prices of real estate were extremely plunged whereas the foreign reserves of the country were in crisis (Ba, 2022). Almost all foreign reserves were spent to protect the value of Thai baht. Thailand's public debts also substantially increased from around 170 billion baht in 1997 to over 900 billion baht in 1999 (Suthiwart-Narueput & Pradittatsanee, 1999). During the crisis, the country's GDP sharply dropped and reached a peak in 1998 (World Bank, n.d.). In order to revive the Thai economy as a result of the financial crisis, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra publicly announced the goal of the country to eradicate poverty and recover the economic recession by launching a strategic economic policy that strengthened domestic economy and enhanced the country's international competitiveness. There were five strategic sectors that the Thai government prioritized at that time namely food, tourism, fashion, software, and automotive as a



means to revive the economy and increase its competitiveness in the global market. The ultimate goal of the food sector, as determined by the government, was to make Thailand “the kitchen of the world” (Intarakumnerd, 2011). In this context, the promotion of exports of Thai food and agricultural products was one of the government’s priorities. According to a policy statement of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra delivered to the national assembly in 2001, the government aimed to concentrate on the acceleration of exports at all levels, and create a worldwide marketing network in order to improve the overall economy and international trade. The private sector, including small and medium-sized businesses, will be supported by the government in terms of preparedness and financial assistance to be able to compete in the international trade arena. Moreover, the government will elevate the country to become a top regional center for trade in goods and services. Lastly, the government will help Thai businesses and entrepreneurs to gain intellectual property and carry out their duties in the promotion of exports through marketing approaches so that they can effectively participate in the world market (Ministry of Energy, 2016). These are some of the economic policies promoted by the Thai government at that time, in which making Thailand “a leading food export country” and “the kitchen of the world” were the main focuses.

To facilitate the economic policy and serve the state interests namely “a leading food export country” and “the kitchen of the world”, gastrodiploamacy projects were launched by the Thai government. In other words, the economic policy aiming to promote the state interests during that time is the key idea behind Thailand’s gastrodiploamacy. It should be noted that gastrodiploamacy is not only established to globally promote Thai cuisine and improve the country’s image but also to facilitate economic policy and serve the state interests. By promoting Thai food to be known globally under gastrodiploamacy campaign, it will allow Thailand to increase the global demand for Thai food products. Under the projects, the government has created a business link and provided financial loans for the private sector to invest in the overseas Thai restaurants and Thai food industry, resulting in growing numbers of Thai restaurants abroad and increasing exports of Thai food products. This process is market-driven by selling Thai culinary culture to foreigners which helps increase the exports of Thai food products and enhance economic contributions to the country (Sunanta, 2005). By increasing the number of overseas Thai restaurants, the government will be able to expand the channels for exporting more Thai food and agricultural products and make Thailand “a leading food export country” and “the kitchen of the world” (Zhang, 2015). In other words, Thailand’s gastrodiploamacy was intentionally established by the Thai government to facilitate the economic policy of the country during that period and serve the state interests. Since the government implemented gastrodiploamacy in 2002, the value of Thai goods exports grew by 23 percent in 2004 after the financial crisis (Royal Thai Government, n.d.).

## **Discussion**

Rather than a purely economic factor provided by the existing literature, this article argues that the three factors combined together are the key puzzles influencing Thailand to initiate this policy in the first place. This section will elaborate on how the findings are developed and lead to the conduct of gastrodiploamacy through the lens of constructivism. First, constructivists believe that the ideational structure, like the global norm or the global trend, can shape state identity and its actions, whereas the state’s performance in the international arena can influence the ideational structure (Flockhart, 2016). The research then investigates the global trend that existed before Thailand initiated gastrodiploamacy in 2002. It found that during the 1990s, the narratives of nation branding as an ideational structure considerably gained much attention among academics and national governments. The trend of nation branding first began in the UK with the “Cool Britannia” campaign,



a project to repair and improve the British image damaged by the outbreak of Mad Cow Disease and its backwardness by branding the nation with British positive features like arts and music (Viktorin et al., 2018). Since then, the trend of nation branding has been practiced and has become a routine policy for national governments in many countries including Thailand. Thailand has decided to jump on this bandwagon since the early 2000s. In 2001, the Thai government launched a branding Thailand project by discovering both strengths and weaknesses of the nation so as to have a better understanding of Thailand's brand positioning. In this case, Thai cuisine is found to be one of the most outstanding strengths of the country. Influenced by the trend of nation branding, the Thai government launched gastrodiplomacy projects by branding the country with Thai cuisine, one of its positive features, under the slogan "Thailand: Kitchen of the World" to create better brand recognition and stand out from the crowd.

Second, constructivists believe that historical contexts and ideas play an important role in constructing state identity and national image, which in turn will shape state performances including foreign policy. The research then explores the historical context and collective ideas that existed before Thailand decided to initiate this policy in 2002. It found that since the settlement of US military bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War, the country's image has been negatively associated with a sex tourism destination in the eyes of foreigners. This has created the negative stereotype to the country. Thailand has been commonly perceived by the foreigners as the top notorious place for sex tourism and prostitution for over six decades. At this stage, the country started to look at itself who it is, what position it possesses, and how it is seen by others. Then, the Thai government and other policymakers shared their collective ideas and understandings about the issue that serious actions were required in order to correct this negative image. Thereby, gastrodiplomacy was launched by the Thai government with the aims of rebranding the country with positive features like Thai food to create a positive image and new senses of identity as "the kitchen of the world" and "a leading food export country" instead of a sex tourism destination.

Third, constructivists believe that state identity informs state interests and, in turn, its actions. Since the new senses of identity that Thailand desires to create and project are "the kitchen of the world" and "a leading food export country", the state interests are formed within this context. Influenced by the state interests in being "the kitchen of the world" and "a leading food export country", the promotion of the exports of Thai food and agricultural products was the main focus of economic policy. The economic policy then impacts state action, including foreign policy, to initiate gastrodiplomacy as one of the instruments to globally promote Thai food, raise the global demand for Thai food products, and expand the channel for Thai food exports so that Thailand will become "the kitchen of the world" and "a leading food export country". In other words, gastrodiplomacy was launched in order to facilitate the economic policy and serve the state interests at that time. Hence, gastrodiplomacy not only facilitates the economic policy of the country but also promotes the national interests, strengthens the new senses of state identity, and maintains the global trend of nation branding while creating a new trend of "gastrodiplomacy", which later inspired other countries like South Korea and Malaysia to follow the same path. It could be seen that these three factors are actually interrelated. They are mutually constitutive, which is the core idea of constructivism.

In order to successfully promote the country's positive image and correct the negative image of sex tourism, all stakeholders, including government officials, the private sector, and the local people, need to be willing to make more serious attempts to solve the problem. Despite laws against prostitution, the laws are still ambiguous and not effectively enforced. It also should be noted that the sex trade is the result of economic exploitation, in which impoverished and uneducated women and men are the victims of this vicious cycle. The government should address the root cause by providing



education that can be effectively assessed by all people and by providing more jobs and learning skills so that they will have more choices to earn their lives and provide for their families. While strengthening laws and punishments, the government needs to continuously and actively promote gastrodiplomacy projects with strong collaboration from the private sector like overseas restaurant owners. Like commercial brands, the country's image can be rebuilt, manipulated, and communicated by using marketing techniques through mass media. The negative stereotype of a country is not pre-given but subject to change. There is still a chance for Thailand to eliminate the negative image of sex tourism and successfully promote the positive one through the promotion of national cuisine. However, it will absolutely take time and require long-term ambitions to gain the result since Thailand has suffered from this problem for over six decades. The perceptions of the foreign public toward the country cannot be positively changed overnight. As a nation's image is fluid and complex, how to communicate a single image to a variety of audiences is still a difficult task. It requires strong collaboration between the government and private sectors. Even though the signs of progress are visible, it still requires more momentum to successfully achieve the result.

## Conclusion

The power of food not only lies in the realm of fundamental elements for survival but also in the international relations sphere. Transforming as a diplomatic instrument, food can be used by the states to project their unique culture and identity to foreign audiences in order to create better brand recognition of a nation and extend soft power abroad. Gastrodiplomacy provides an opportunity for the states including Thailand to utilize their own positive and distinctive features like national cuisine to stand out from the crowd, create their own nation brand, and gain a better reputation by winning the hearts and minds of the foreign public through their stomachs. In the world of competing identities, gastrodiplomacy has become a crucial task for many countries worldwide to create their own nation brand so that they will not be overshadowed by others. With the unique flavors of Thai cuisine, gastrodiplomacy allows Thailand to distinguish itself from its neighboring countries and gain positive perceptions from foreign audiences. According to the research findings, the three main factors, namely the narratives of nation branding, a negative image of sex tourism, and an economic policy during that period, are the key factors influencing Thailand to initiate this foreign policy in the first place. Rather than a purely economic factor provided by the existing literature, this article argues that the three factors combined together are the key puzzles behind Thailand's gastrodiplomacy.

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