

The Search for Thailand's Soft Power: A Vehicle for Economic Development?

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1. Introduction

Under the heat of the California desert climate, Thai rapper Danupa “Milli” Khanatheerakul stunned the audience by eating a mouthful of mango sticky rice – a favorite Thai dessert – while performing her song *Mango Sticky Rice* on stage at the Coachella music festival. The following day, the demand for this dessert in Thailand skyrocketed. Customers flooded dessert shops in the country to soothe their cravings for sweet sticky rice served with ripe mango (Reuters, 2022). Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha rushed to comment on the phenomenon mentioning that the Ministry of Culture considered registering mango sticky rice on UNESCO’s cultural heritage list. Thai media wooed Milli for not only being the first Thai solo artist ever invited to perform at the world-renowned music festival, but also a promoter of Thai “soft power.”

This was not the first time the term “soft power” gained traction among the Thai officials. Back in 2021, Prayut praised a Thai-born K-pop idol Lalisa “Lisa” Manoban, a member of Blackpink, for featuring the Phnom Rung Stone Castle and Thai craftsmanship in her music video *LALISA*. Following Lisa’s exponential success, Prayut expressed his readiness to promote the country’s soft power as an economic tool (Bangprapa, 2021). The Tourism Council in Buri Ram, the northeastern province where Lisa was born and raised, followed suit by organizing the first-ever meatball festival in response to Lisa’s revelation about her love for grilled and deep-fried meatballs in her hometown (Thai PBS, 2021). Just like Milli’s mango sticky rice phenomenon, Lisa’s comment raised the sales of those meatball vendors in her hometown by around 10,000 percent, from a few hundred to more than 10,000 baht a day. The money circulated at the meatball festival alone was as high as 1 million baht (approx. 28,800 USD) a day.

Despite these repeated references to Thailand’s soft power potential, the Thai government has done very little to support the country’s creative economy in a more concrete manner. Even worse, Thai authorities seem unclear about what soft power means, what it is for, and how it can or cannot be wielded. This article discusses how the Thai policymakers approach the policy of soft power development and how their misunderstanding of soft power may undermine their ability to achieve their goal—whether that be economic growth or reinvention of the country’s image.

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2. Thai Policymakers and Their (Mis)understanding of Soft Power

The concept of soft power, though frequently used, lacks a concrete definition. More often than not, the term “soft power” has been used interchangeably, at least by Thai policymakers and scholars, with cultural policies, such as the campaign to promote Thai boxing – a Thai culture – as soft power (Charoenvattananukul, 2018). The conflation of the two terms reflects a profound misunderstanding of what soft power means within the Thai policymaking circle and beyond. While culture is considered an essential resource for soft power alongside value and foreign policy, culture is not soft power in and of itself. According to Joseph Nye (2005) – the inventor of the soft power concept – soft power is defined as the ability of a country to influence the behavior of others in a way it wants. As opposed to hard power, soft power rests upon co-optation rather than coercion, attraction rather than inducement. As much as one cannot force others to admire them, a state cannot pressure other countries to accept its culture and value. At least, that will not be called soft power. Soft power arises only when the culture, values, and foreign policies of a state are admired and accepted by other states, so much so that they choose to follow what that country wants. In other words, soft power is in the eyes of the beholder. It requires an acceptance of outside influence by the receiving state. It is a two-way street.

Indeed, states can promote policies that may eventually result in an increase in their soft power, but it takes other states – the beholder – to decide whether to accept the country’s culture and values and follow its lead. South Korea, for example, initially invested in public diplomacy and cultural policies to improve its image amid tension on the Korean Peninsula. Situated in a geopolitically challenging location, South Korea saw the need to increase the global recognition of its government. Although the South Korean government had long emphasized changing the country’s image through public diplomacy, it was not until after the 1997 Financial Crisis that the South Korean government started to invest in cultural sectors to resist the permeation of foreign pop culture. After recognizing the potential of Korean culture, the Korean government then began to actively promote its cultural and creative industries more systematically. This ultimately led to the rise of the Korean Wave, which contributed massively to the country’s economic growth and more recognition on the global scale (Pakmalee, 2021). In this case, it was clear that the Korean government did not plan to promote the cultural policies for the sake of having soft power. Instead, it promoted its cultural and creative industries to enhance its economy and reinvent its image. Once policymakers and citizens in other countries admire its culture and achievements so much that they want to follow the country’s lead, its soft power automatically arises.

The case of Thailand is different. The Thai policymakers and scholars have outright conflated Thai culture with soft power. For Thai policymakers, promoting Thai culture means promoting Thai soft power as if soft power can be created without considering how the audience perceives it. In many circumstances, Thai officials have referred to soft power as something that can be created and promoted. One of the most obvious examples was the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Commerce’s announcement of the “5 Fs soft power” campaign. These 5 Fs consist of food, film, fashion, fighting, and festival (Petpailin, 2022). Undeniably, these five sectors are globally known Thai cultural resources. From Pad Thai to Tom Yum Kung, Thai foods are cherished in almost every corner of the world. Thai boxing, better known as Muay Thai, is globally recognized and has recently been added to the list of sports in the Olympic Games. Nevertheless, the fact that Thai culture is well-known internationally does not make these cultural sectors “soft power.” At most, food, film, fashion, fighting, and festivals can be considered resources for soft power, not soft power

itself. Whether or not these soft power resources will turn into actual soft power will depend on how the country chooses to employ them and, more importantly, whether other countries admire them enough to change their behaviors to suit Thailand's interests.

3. What Is It For? Who Is It For?

Another problem resulting from the conflation of the term “soft power” and cultural policies is the confusion over the end goal of such a strategy. According to an interview given by the Thai prime minister, the country's soft power will help enhance Thailand's creative economy. This is puzzling because, given the definition of soft power, creative and cultural industries can be the resource of soft power, but not the other way around. By focusing its efforts on creating and exporting Thailand's soft power, the Thai government falls short of seeing what is achievable with this policy. Setting aside the discrepancy in the understanding of soft power as a concept, it is unclear what these cultural policies are for. Cultural policies can drive economic growth via export and tourism or help reinvent the country's image. But these end goals require different approaches, processes, and infrastructures. Without a clear vision of what the end goal will be, the Thai government falls short of creating policies and tools necessary to steer businesses in the desired directions.

Even if the Thai government has a clear vision of what its “soft power” can generate, the current plans to create and enhance its creative economy are still far from being comprehensive. The Thai government has so far assigned various government agencies to oversee the development of cultural industries. However, unlike in South Korea, where a long-term strategy and specific agencies were established to promote its cultural and creative industries, the Thai government has not been explicit about how these agencies working under different ministries will collaborate to push forward the agenda. To make the matter worse, several regulations exist that prevent local creators and developers from joining the market for the creative economy and acquiring assistance from involving agencies (Bangkok Post, 2021).

Adding to the bureaucratic difficulties is the mindset of leaders, policymakers, and bureaucrats in Thailand about the cultural policies and creative economy. Although the success of a creative economy rests on, as its name says, creativity, Thai authorities seldom accept new interpretations of the Thai culture (Channuntapipat, 2022). In the eyes of Thai authorities, Thai culture is only referred to the country's traditional culture, such as Thai boxing, Thai traditional dance, and Thai traditional fabric. The contemporary culture that might resonate better with an international audience, such as the Thai series featuring gender non-conforming characters that receive excellent attention in Thailand's neighboring countries and beyond, may not be qualified for support from the government as it does not represent their current conceptualization of Thai culture. In many circumstances, Thai filmmakers face censorship and government intervention. Contents deemed critical to matters of national security are prohibited. Even alcoholic drinks shown in Thai movies and dramas must be blurred as they can undermine people's morality. Consequently, in addition to receiving inadequate support from the government, content creators in Thailand also experience a lack of freedom in expressing creativity.

4. Conclusion

Following the success of South Korea in promoting its culture and cultural products, the Thai government began to look toward the same model as a tool to stimulate economic growth. Nevertheless, Thailand may fall short of following the South Korean footsteps for reasons such as a misunderstanding of what soft power is and what it can achieve, a lack of clear vision and goal, and an unclear long-term plan and strategy. If the creative economy and “soft power” mean nothing more than a showcase of Thai culture by successful Thais on the global stage like in the cases of Milli and Lisa, the dream to boost the Thai economy with creative industries and achieve the actual “soft power” may be a step too far.

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