

Gastrodiplomacy as Statecraft: Evaluating the "Thai Select" Certification Strategy

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Abstract

Gastrodiplomacy has emerged as a significant tool of soft power. However, since the term's inception in the early 2000s and its operationalization in 2012, scholarly analysis remains limited regarding how states systematically leverage culinary culture as an instrument of public diplomacy. Using a narrative review methodology, this study examines the evolution of the concept and analyzes the structural implementation of Thailand's "Kitchen of the World" program. The analysis reveals that the program's success relied on a rigorous standardization framework ('Thai Select') and government-backed supply chains, effectively scaling the number of Thai restaurants globally to over 15,000. These findings suggest that successful gastrodiplomacy functions primarily as an economic engine and as driver of tourism development, rather than purely as a tool for cultural or political co-optation.

Introduction

Contextually, gastrodiplomacy is situated within the field of public diplomacy and remains intrinsically linked to the concept of soft power (Rockower, 2020; Guofeng, 2024). Both soft power and gastrodiplomacy are relatively new concepts. Joseph Nye initially conceptualized Soft power on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the framework has evolved over the past 35 years through the contribution of multiple authors (Nye, 2017; Yigit, 2024). Conceptually, soft power instrumentalizes culture, values, and foreign policy to leverage attraction rather than coercion in the pursuit of political goals (Nye, 1990, 2017, 2019).

Vis-à-vis soft power, gastrodiplomacy as a concept has less academic origins, being first coined by The Economist in 2002 to describe the Thai government's efforts to export Thai food culture (Li & Mok, 2025; Rockower, 2012). Since then, the concept of institutionalizing culinary culture as public policy has gained significant traction within both public discourse and government circles, a trend reflected in the growing body of academic literature on the subject (Li & Mok, 2025). The first attempt to operationalize the concept only appeared a decade after its inception, with Rockower (2012). This initial scarcity of literature contrasts with the fundamental reality that food is an essential part of the human experience, and that for millennia it has been

used to convey a sense of special status and to forge cultural identity (Cabral et al., 2025; Garnsey, 1999).

Gastrodiplomacy, as defined by Rockower, is situated at the intersection of public diplomacy and the culinary arts; it is described as “a way to win hearts and minds” (2012, p. 236). In his definition, Rockower explains that gastrodiplomacy extends beyond the promotion of a country's culinary culture or products; rather, it serves as a holistic means of fostering a deeper understanding of a culture among foreign audiences. Other scholars broaden this definition, positing that gastrodiplomacy is employed not merely to foster cultural understanding, but also to strengthen bilateral relations and drive economic growth (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014). Multiple governments have developed and maintained gastrodiplomacy programs (Zhang, 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study pursues the following objectives:

- a) Provide an overview of gastrodiplomacy as both a concept and a subject of academic inquiry within diplomacy and political science.
- b) Explore theoretical approaches to gastrodiplomacy and elucidate its conceptual foundations.
- c) Examine how gastrodiplomacy, as a strategy in international relations, intersects with various political dimensions.
- d) Evaluate the strategic benefits and limitations of gastrodiplomacy programs.

To examine the state of the field regarding gastrodiplomacy and how it operates within the broader scope of public diplomacy, this study is structured as a narrative literature review. It aims to synthesize the existing consensus on the subject, specifically: how it relates to public diplomacy; how it interacts with soft power; and, crucially, the strategic benefits and limitations of these programs. The nature of this study's objectives suggests that the existing literature on gastrodiplomacy is extensive, thereby necessitating a research approach oriented towards critical analysis. (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005).

This study is organized into five sections: Introduction; Literature Review, where the key findings are synthesized; Methodology, which details the review process; Discussion of the state of the field; and Conclusion, where avenues for future research and opportunities for advancing the study of gastrodiplomacy are proposed.

Literature Review

Gastrodiplomacy constitutes a component of the broader field of cultural diplomacy, aimed at garnering favor with audiences through the medium of food (Rockower, 2012). As Rockower explains, gastrodiplomacy distinguishes itself from other diplomatic initiatives through the utilization of food, representing a strategic effort by national governments to enhance their nation brand. As such, it serves as a powerful instrument to enhance national soft power, drive economic growth, and foster cross-cultural understanding (Nirwandy & Awang, 2014). A pivotal component of this evolution is the diversification of agency: key stakeholders are no longer exclusively state actors, but now also encompass a range of non-state actors, including tourism agencies, celebrity chefs, corporations, and private individuals (Zhang, 2015).

While it is imperative to define gastrodiplomacy, it is equally critical to delineate what the concept is not. Gastrodiplomacy is distinct from food diplomacy, which “entails the use of food aid and food relief in the period of crisis or catastrophe” (Rockower, 2012, p. 237). Similarly, the concept must be differentiated from culinary diplomacy. Rockower characterizes the latter as the employment of cuisine to advance diplomatic objectives within the sphere of formal diplomacy, specifically during official functions or state visits. While this distinction represents the prevailing consensus, it is not exclusive. An alternative, though less prominent perspective within the literature, posits that gastrodiplomacy constitutes a subset of culinary diplomacy (Chapple-Sokol, 2013).

Evolution and Historical Context

The term “gastro-diplomacy” was coined in a 2002 article in *The Economist*. The piece detailed the Thai government’s efforts to leverage the popularity of Thai cuisine to increase export volumes and stimulate the national economy. A decade elapsed between the term’s canonical inception and its academic operationalization. This academic operationalization manifested in two seminal articles published just one year apart: one by Rockower (2012) and another by Chapple-Sokol (2013). Chapple-Sokol posits a model wherein gastrodiplomacy functions as a subset of public diplomacy, specifically cultural diplomacy, predicated on the employment of cuisine within diplomatic engagements between state agents. In contrast, Rockower distinguishes it from the routine duties of the diplomatic corps, viewing it instead as an autonomous instrument of public and cultural diplomacy. The literature indicates that it is Rockower’s conceptualization that has since gained the most traction (Li & Mok, 2025).

Theoretical References

Gastrodiplomacy can be conceptualized through two distinct lenses. On one hand, it functions as a government strategy designed to project ideals, institutions, and culture, thereby fostering an understanding of national policies and objectives (Cabral et al., 2025; Gilboa, 2008). In this sense, it is situated at the core of public diplomacy. On the other hand, it serves as a mechanism to shape the international narrative by facilitating access to a state’s cultural goods (Cabral et al., 2025; Cull, 2009). Under this formulation, gastrodiplomacy programs align more closely with the realm of cultural diplomacy.

Nye identifies three primary pillars of soft power: culture, political values, and foreign policy (Cabral et al., 2025; Nye, 2017, 2019). Through this prism, both conceptualizations clearly situate gastrodiplomacy within the broader framework of soft power.

Gastrodiplomacy as a source of Soft Power

Food and cuisine can be effectively deployed to underscore national values and culture (Moscato, 2018). This dynamic is illustrated in analyses of US-Japan relations and their respective soft power capabilities; notably, President Obama’s 2014 state visit culminated in a dinner at the renowned Sukiyabashi Jiro, a venue previously featured in a documentary. Chef Jiro Ono and his

establishment are regarded as exemplars of Japanese cuisine, embodying the traditional artisanal methods intrinsic to the nation's culture. While this specific instance aligns more closely with the definition of culinary diplomacy, it is noteworthy that sushi has evolved globally from a preservation technique to a delicacy, and finally to a ubiquitous convenience food (Brown, 2012). Given that soft power is defined by the capacity to co-opt rather than coerce (Nye, 1990), the influence Japan has leveraged is undeniable, evidenced by its securing of US support in the Senkaku Islands dispute against China (Moscato, 2018).

The nexus between food and soft power is predicated on the reality that gastronomy functions, in practice, as an instrument of attraction and influence. Its integration into external culinary landscapes contributes unequivocally to reshaping the practices and representational frameworks of the receiving societies (Raffard, 2021; Rambourg, 2016; Reynolds, 2012). This theoretical and practical linkage explains why gastrodiplomacy is consistently situated as a tool of soft power and co-optation within the diplomatic sphere (Cabral et al., 2025).

Gastrodiplomacy as a gateway for tourism

Scholars have concluded that gastrodiplomacy programs have proven effective in cultivating knowledge and fostering culinary appreciation among tourists (Freire & Gertner, 2021; Nair, 2021). These authors argue that cuisine serves as a primary driver in destination selection, and that food-related experiences constitute the content most frequently shared by tourists on social media (Freire & Gertner, 2021). This latter point corroborates earlier research identifying a positive correlation between high-quality culinary experiences and the intention to revisit a destination (Lertputtarak, 2011).

The impact of non-state actors

States and their institutions are not the sole stakeholders in gastrodiplomacy campaigns. A US State Department report, *Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy* (2005), underscores the necessity of increasing exchanges of creative professionals and developing partnerships with the private sector. This report signals the growing imperative to engage non-state actors in these campaigns.

Even prior to the advent of gastrodiplomacy as a formal concept, diplomats had employed non-state actors as instruments to bolster state soft power. One study describes how the favorable American perception of Italian natural agricultural capabilities helped mitigate racist sentiments, transforming the classification of Italians from “undesirable” to “desirable” migrants during the US Era of Mass Migration (mid-19th to early 20th century) (Mazzoli, 2021). Consistent with this argument, scholars posit that the diaspora constitutes a powerful instrument that can be mobilized to amplify the impact of gastrodiplomacy programs on public diplomacy efforts (Trihartono, Purwowibowo, et al., 2020; Trihartono, Santoso, et al., 2020).

Gastrodiplomacy as a source of tensions

Notwithstanding the positive correlations identified in the literature, it must be acknowledged that gastrodiplomacy efforts can also engender rivalry. Since the 1990s, the Turkish government has endeavored to establish Turkish cuisine as a “world cuisine,” with state and non-state actors working in tandem to realize this objective. These efforts by Türkiye have precipitated multiple controversies and remain a matter of official concern for Ankara (Karaosmanoglu, 2020).

This phenomenon is not unique to Türkiye; protests also erupted when Singapore submitted a unilateral bid for the recognition of Hawker culture as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Malaysian officials voiced objections, contending that Hawker culture originates from, and remains more prevalent in, Malaysia. Even when Yeoh Soon Hin, Chairman of the Penang State Tourism Development Committee, proposed a joint bid, he faced domestic criticism. This backlash resulted in an entrenchment of the Malaysian stance, insisting that the country should submit its own bid to prevent a scenario of “Singapore before Penang” (Lee & Kim, 2021, p. 8).

Notably, UNESCO frameworks permit multi-national bids, as evidenced in 2010 when Spain, Greece, Italy, and Morocco initially collaborated to inscribe the “Mediterranean Diet” as shared heritage. This inscription was subsequently expanded to include Cyprus, Croatia, and Portugal. The literature suggests that the rationale behind unilateral bids extends beyond fostering cultural awareness and heritage preservation; it is also designed to consolidate and project a robust nation brand (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Further instances of rivalry within the nexus of food and national identity are evident, such as the competing bids submitted by South Korea and North Korea regarding Kimchi. Similarly, Armenia and Azerbaijan submitted distinct dossiers regarding flatbread. The former case was resolved through distinct UNESCO recognitions, while the latter, following intensive negotiations, culminated in a multi-national inscription involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Türkiye, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Thailand: pre-conceptual instrumentalization

The significance of the Thai case stems from the fact that policy praxis anteceded theoretical definition. The term “gastrodiplomacy” appeared in the literature only in 2002, in an article published in *The Economist*, specifically to describe the Thai government's strategy (*The Economist*, 2002).

The “Thailand: Kitchen of the World” program was launched in the early 2000s (Thailand Foreign Office, 2015). The stated objective was to ensure the existence of over 8,000 Thai restaurants globally by the end of 2003 (*The Economist*, 2002). This program embodies the country's foreign policy strategy, known as Bamboo Diplomacy (Chachavalpongpun, 2024). This approach is characterized by pragmatism and flexibility, adapting to the shifting dynamics of the international system (Cheow, 1986). Consequently, cuisine emerges as an ideal tool, serving as a non-threatening instrument of soft power.

To achieve these ends, the Thai government instrumentalized the culinary sector through concrete financial and logistical measures. Beyond promotion, credit lines were established for

Thai investors, and pre-designed restaurant blueprints were developed to facilitate the opening of new venues abroad (Thailand Foreign Office, 2015). The program thus presents a dual objective: the creation of tools for cultural co-optation, and the economic incentivization of culinary exports.

The literature indicates a strong mediating relationship between soft power, gastrodiplomacy, and the intention to revisit the country (Subphonkulanan, 2024). The Thai government leveraged this relationship to curate positive images of “Thai-ness,” thereby increasing food-induced tourism (Muangasame & Park, 2019). These programs operate via government stimuli (top-down) bolstered by community engagement (bottom-up). A central mechanism is the attribution of authenticity certificates (“Thai Select”). This certification creates a supply chain dependency, as it mandates the importation of products from Thailand and the adherence to traditional preparation methods (Zhang, 2015). Complementarily, the use of multi-channel strategies for nation branding helped propel Thailand onto the international stage of mass tourism (Khampusaen & Chanprasopchai, 2025).

Crucially, this strategy emerged within a context of economic recovery, serving as a response to the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. This instrumentalization has proven effective in the long term. Recent data indicates that the number of Thai restaurants has significantly exceeded the initial target, with current estimates suggesting over 15,000 establishments globally (Tanakorn Sangiam, 2023). This growth validates the Thai model as the paradigmatic case study for the application of soft power through gastronomy.

Methodology

The literature suggests that gastrodiplomacy, as a locus of inquiry within International Relations, suffers from a lack of empirical clarity (Li & Mok, 2025).

To fulfill the objectives of this study, a narrative/integrative literature review was conducted. This review typology is characterized by a critical and integrative analysis of relevant studies, enabling the mapping of the state of the art, the identification of conceptual trends, and the synthesis of significant theoretical contributions, without adhering to the rigid formal protocols required in systematic reviews (Henry et al., 2018; Skelly et al., 2019; Torraco, 2005).

Given that gastrodiplomacy constitutes a nascent field of inquiry characterized by fragmented scholarship, the narrative review proved appropriate for collating fundamental contributions and contextualizing the conceptual development of the topic (Snyder, 2019).

An integrative or narrative literature review must address four modes of qualitative and critical synthesis: clarifying a research agenda, providing the foundations for a conceptual taxonomy, comprehending conceptual frameworks, and spearheading efforts to establish metatheory in contexts where concepts are multidisciplinary (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Considering the necessity to elucidate the conceptual foundations of gastrodiplomacy, this literature review adopts an exploratory approach. Table 1 delineates the methodological approach, alongside the identified research gaps and the primary questions guiding this study.

Tabel 1 Methodological Approach

Research Gap	Requirement	Alignment with Narrative Reviews (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005)
Gastrodiplomacy as a nascent research concept, conceptually underdeveloped.	To counterbalance fragmentation and facilitate theoretical consolidation.	Narrative reviews address broad and complex topics wherein the literature is heterogeneous and dispersed.
Gastrodiplomacy as a multidisciplinary construct.	To discern operational parallels in gastrodiplomacy and identify commonalities.	Narrative reviews interpret and synthesize distinct strands of inquiry when evidence bases are methodologically diverse.
Limited causal evidence regarding the effects of gastrodiplomacy.	To elucidate established knowledge and delineate what remains unknown.	To map gaps, controversies, and unresolved debates in areas where systematic reviews are unfeasible.
Agenda-setting function for gastrodiplomacy, considering existing evidence regarding its praxis.	To propose new directions and syntheses.	To contextualize emergent fields and provide a theoretical/structural framework for subsequent empirical work.

The bibliographic search was conducted primarily within the Scopus and Web of Science databases, selected for the breadth and relevance of their scientific archives (Zhu & Liu, 2020). The keywords employed included “gastrodiplomacy”, “public diplomacy”, “culinary”, and “food”. Literature published between 2000 and 2025 was considered as a guiding parameter, given that the first recognized reference to the term appeared in 2002 in *The Economist*. Source selection was predicated on theoretical pertinence and contribution to scholarly discourse, prioritizing studies published in peer-reviewed journals.

Discussion

Rockower theorizes gastrodiplomacy as a tool of co-optation, wherein distinct peoples are brought together through shared culinary experiences (Rockower, 2012). However, an analysis of the literature reveals a disjuncture between this idealistic narrative and the competitive praxis of International Relations. The success of the Thai model precipitated a contagion effect, prompting other states to replicate these programs within a rivalrous environment. This tension is palpable in disputes over UNESCO recognition, as documented in the cases of flatbread and kimchi (Karaosmanoglu, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2021). These examples demonstrate that, contrary to the proposed ideal of harmony, gastrodiplomacy can exacerbate regional identity conflicts.

The review also evidences a paradigm shift in cultural diplomacy: the erosion of the state monopoly. While traditional diplomacy was the sole preserve of the State, gastrodiplomacy necessitates symbiosis. As observed in the Thai case, the government provides funding and certification but relies entirely on the diaspora, chefs, and entrepreneurs for the operational implementation of the strategy (Zhang, 2015). The failure of state strategy absent community

engagement validates, in practice, the concept of “New Public Diplomacy” and the criticality of non-state actors described in the literature (Navarro, 2019).

Finally, regarding the genesis of these programs, there exists a dissonance between theoretical discourse and practical motivation. Although academia emphasizes “cultural understanding” and the strengthening of bilateral relations, it is observed that the primary driver for these initiatives is frequently economic (Freire & Gertner, 2021; Lertputtarak, 2011; Subphonkulanan, 2024). Gastrodiplomacy operates, predominantly, as a nation branding strategy wherein culture serves a mercantilist purpose, whether for economic recovery, as seen in post-crisis Thailand, or for the stimulation of tourism and exports (Li & Mok, 2025; Subphonkulanan, 2024).

The growing, yet still limited corpus of literature on gastrodiplomacy highlights an opportunity for methodological rigor and more diversified levels of analysis (Li & Mok, 2025). Furthermore, future research must aim for greater comprehensiveness, moving beyond the Asian states that are overrepresented in current scholarship, to examine how Great Powers utilize gastrodiplomacy as an instrument of public diplomacy (Li & Mok, 2025).

This literature review demonstrates that while qualitative studies exist, there is a scarcity of quantitative research. It remains to be determined whether gastrodiplomacy is genuinely a tool available to Small Powers to exert influence distinct from that of Great Powers (Fox, 1959). Future research should attempt to articulate not only how, but also to what extent, gastrodiplomacy influences co-optation within the international system, and the impact this co-optation has on state behavior in International Relations.

Conclusion

The present study sought to examine how gastrodiplomacy, as an emergent concept, is instrumentalized by States to bolster their soft power within the international system.

The literature review permits the conclusion that, rather than functioning solely as an instrument of pure political co-optation, gastrodiplomacy asserts itself predominantly as a tool for economic growth and recovery. While the Thai case demonstrates a positive correlation between gastronomic strategy and increased tourism, the literature does not unequivocally substantiate that this attraction translates into an effective capacity to co-opt other States into strategic political alignments.

The limitations of this study are inherent to the narrative review methodology adopted. While this method proved effective in identifying theoretical consensus and mapping the state of the art, its capacity to detect systematic gaps in the literature is more constrained than that of a systematic review. Additionally, the temporal constraints of the academic term limited the depth of the empirical analysis.

For future research, a diversification of levels of analysis, methods, and objects of study is suggested. It is imperative to expand the geographic focus beyond the Asian continent, where the majority of current literature is concentrated, and to investigate how countries without explicit government programs effectively export their gastronomy. Finally, it would be pertinent to develop

comparative frameworks that allow for the quantification of the success of these strategies, clearly distinguishing between economic or tourism-related outcomes and political soft power gains.

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