

Food as Power: Thai Cuisine's Impact on Identity, and Cultural Development

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I never really got to see my parents on the weekends. From a young age I was accustomed to my weekend world being me, my sibling, and an empty house. Whilst we were left to our own devices, my parents spent each waking moment working in a thankless industry that remains all-too familiar for Thai Americans: restaurants and service. From dawn to dusk my parents served the whims of boorish customers and bussed tables in Rockville, returning long after we had drifted to sleep. For 18 years my parents worked within the restaurant industry, and as the primary path of survival for Thai immigrants they made me vow to never work in the industry they spent so much of their lives in. To promise I would do better, work harder, and build a better life.

As analyzed by Dr. Bhanityanakorn and Dr. Rattanamane, Southeast Asian academics focused on marketing and commerce, when people think of Thailand, the first thing they think of is the cuisine, each year growing more recognized and widespread in the United States (Bhanityanakorn and Rattanamane). This growth is not due to coincidence, but rather conscious efforts made by the government, the most famous of such efforts would be the Global Thai Program. Introduced in 2002 by the prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, it provides grants for Thai people to travel across the world and establish restaurants, widely considered one of the first and most successful forms of culinary diplomacy (Domrongchai).

However, the process began long before Shinawatra's program through conscious efforts from both the Thai government and its constituents to use our cuisine as a tool to gain cultural recognition and capital, resulting in unintended side effects. Thai cuisine's usage as a tool for cultural modification and recognition has succeeded in cementing Thailand's reputation as a "food-hub," but has resulted in the tokenization of Thai cuisine and limited mobility for Thai Americans, restricting them to the service industry.

In times of rising globalization both within and outside Thailand, Thai cuisine has fundamentally and continuously been modified to ensure a place within the global stage. Thai food underwent its first shift in the 1930s under the administration of the third prime minister, Plaek Phibunsongkram, and the origin of Pad Thai. Designated as the national dish in 1938, Pad Thai originated as an adaptation of foreign Teochow Kway Teow noodles, and was prioritized based on the dwindling supply of rice at the time (Yao et al. 509). According to the research of Chinese and Southeast Asian cultural researchers Yao Yao, Baoyun Yang, and Xinxin Wang, Phibunsongkram's administration used Pad Thai as a tool for cultural control and unification,

utilizing techniques such as songs and speeches to popularize the dish and its cultural integration (511). Through the vehicle of food, Thai cuisine and cultural identity was modified, assimilating foreign ingredients in order to form a unified “Thai cultural identity”. Pad Thai became more than food, acting as a symbol of the new Thai collective culture. According to Yao et al., “Through the daily practice of making and eating Pad Thai, Thai people co-created a common memory that tied the cuisine to their cultural identity...but also played an important role in shared memory and national image-building” (515). Pad Thai’s creation and government integration demonstrates Thai cuisine as a controllable tool used to build capital and modify cultural identity. This period sets a precedent about Thai cuisine and its dissemination as a tool for cultural progression and nation building, a strategy carried into the modern day by numerous programs.

Modern globalization has only further driven Thai cultural expansion through cuisine, instating multiple lucrative government programs that further regulated “Thai identity”. Three specific programs come to mind: the Thai Global program as discussed earlier, the Thai Delicious program, and finally the Thai Select program. These programs focus on a different aspect of culinary export, primarily standardization and government certification as “proper Thai cuisine”.

Thai Delicious is a program initiated by prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra, instilling a committee that determined standardized recipes for “true Thai cuisine”, going so far as to utilize a machine that tastes the cuisine for “proper tastes” (Fuller). By 2016 11 dishes were selected as “authentic” including two styles of Tom Yam (a sour soup), three types of curry, and regionalized dishes like northern style sausages and chicken curry (ThaiDelicious.org).

Thai Select focuses more on authenticating restaurants from abroad, operating on two categories of approval, ready-to-eat and restaurant, with restaurants being awarded a causal award all the way up to three stars of approval (Thai Select). While these steps for culinary capital may seem extreme, it has yielded extremely successful results. Thai food is one of the most prominent cuisines throughout the world, and it’s what Thai people both in Thailand and abroad always tout as our greatest pride. But while these initiatives brought extreme monetary and global success, it resulted in a forced reliance on food as the only avenue of survival during immigration.

When Thai immigrants arrived into the United States, Thai cuisine was utilized as a tool for survival, coinciding with a growing global renown. My grandmother was the first to arrive in America after selling pastries in her poor, rural village in southern Thailand. She arrived with few other skills or paths forward for her family, and because of that, she cooked. Her labor followed a lineage of chefs such as Wandee Pathomrit, who slaved away for \$2.80 an hour within kitchens in 1980s Los Angeles (Padoongpatt 112). As immigration from Thailand expanded,

stories such as these grew more prevalent, especially as American attention on Thai cuisine began to expand.

When tourism to Thailand began to boom in the 1960s, Americans such as Marie Wilson began creating cookbooks adapting Thai cuisine and flavors for the American palate, shifting the cuisines form on the global scale (Domrongchai). Following the 1960s, Thai cuisine hit its stride in the US around the 1980s in Los Angeles. As recounted and analyzed by Dr. Mark Padoongpatt, the premier researcher regarding the Thai American community, Thai cuisine's rise in the 1980s coincided with Los Angeles' growing status as a multi-cultural hub in America (Padoongpatt 87). Rising American attention combined with growing government commodification of culinary identity had allowed Thailand to solidify its stance within the global scene while leaving its people to the discretion of unfamiliar palates.

With Thai cuisine's growing presence, the community formed primarily around restaurants and service, their cuisine being their only path toward survival (89). Earlier waves of Thai restaurants, particularly in the 70s, were often forced to exoticize and contort their cuisine to become marketable for American tastes and cement their survival. As explained by Padoongpatt, "Faced with the challenge of introducing a new cuisine, Thai restaurateurs turned to names like 'The Orient,' 'Lee's Thai and Chinese Food,' and 'Fortune Cookie' to use the familiar to draw customers...Thai restaurateurs racialized Thai food as 'Oriental' to make it legible to U.S. citizens already accustomed to Cantonese-style cuisine and the 'Far East'" (98). Faced with limited options and cultural understanding, Thai immigrants were forced to contort their cuisine and culture into something recognizable to western society, setting the precedent for their presence in America. Restaurants served as the sole place for Thai existence in the United States, leaving their livelihood at the mercy of the consumer. Due to this narrow pathway to success, Thai immigrants and their restaurants played caricatured forms of their culture for the sake of "authenticity" in tandem with simplifying their cuisine into "proper Thai food" for American standards.

Being "authentic" has long been played as a buzz-word for ethnic cuisines and communities, a demarcator for American approval, long before the government instilled its own criteria for "proper Thai cuisine". Based on observation of 10 restaurants across the Dallas area by tourism sociologist Dr. Jennie Germann Molz, restaurants would often specify certain dishes as "Thai favorites" and "regional specialties" in order to appeal to American consumers and present as authentic, whilst avoiding food that conflicts with American sensibilities (Germann Molz 57-58). Alongside the dishes itself, restaurants will often play music and utilize traditional decor in order to stage a form of "staged authenticity" based on American understanding (60).

Restaurants were often adorned with Buddhist artifacts and altars, murals of rural Thailand, and imagery of the king in order to present an idealized view of Thailand as an ancient, exotic land, playing up their Thainess for the western eye (Padoongpatt 99).

This performance for the sake of American palates and sensibilities became the standard for Thai restaurants in the United States, presenting a form of acceptable authenticity in order to survive. This has had a tangible impact on the flavors of Thailand in America, primarily the rise in sweet flavors and reduction of spice (109). For my own family, there is a stark contrast between “restaurant Thai” and “home Thai”, my favorite dishes such as my favorite chili paste made from fermented shrimp, or pungent and spicy fish curry like gaeng tai pla would never be seen in a Thai restaurant. Thai immigrants and Americans were left within a narrow pathway to success, with hefty standards leveled against them by both American sensibilities and growing standardization by the government for the sake of profit. This results in the only pathway for survival being restrictive and reductionist to Thai cuisine and culture, while still serving its purpose for the country itself as an expansion of international cultural capital.

As Thai cuisine grew increasingly prevalent and acclaimed within the United States, Thai culture and individuals were simplified and racialized into roles centered almost exclusively in cuisine and service. Ever since Thai immigration first began to spike in the United States, Thai immigrants were often forced to settle into service industry labor when arriving in the United States, despite being middle or even high class back in Thailand due to few employment opportunities as immigrants and non-citizens (Padoongpatt 89). This reflects the experiences of my father, a man who received his bachelors from a prestigious Thai university and got his masters here in the US, yet ended up working as a waiter for approximately 18 to 20 years alongside my mother due to a lack of willing employers. Their time within the service industry was their only choice for survival, and they labored in hopes that I could avoid the fate of my own family and my fellow Thai Americans.

As a diaspora, Thai American identity was restricted both by structural barriers and cultural perceptions, resulting in limited pathways for survival as culinary and service industry laborers. It remains the primary pathway for immigrants even in the modern age, limiting their ability to succeed or socially advance even when over-qualified. According to a student dissertation researching the Thai diaspora in DC through interviews, observations, and surveys, these food ways remain as the primary source of connection between Thai people in the US with cuisine being the exclusive expression of culture (Waugh 78). As the path through cuisine expanded and developed, a unique form of racialization occurred regarding Thai Americans and Thai cuisine, causing Thai labor and existence to be tokenized into an exclusive and innate connection to the cuisine and the service industry. Dr. Padoongpatt further explains this on a podcast with Kelly Pollock, a student dean at the University of Chicago as a form of racialization, “It's ... not this

natural, or even cultural affinity for food...As much as I would like to think that I can just be born to cook Pad Thai. Like, I don't think that's something innate within me. ...I think [it's] dangerous... in the sense that it perpetuates all of these kind of ideas about innate ability, cultural ability..." (Pollock and Padoongpatt 30:45). When a community and culture is so simply categorized, a source of pride can become a curse in disguise. When a path taken out of necessity and survival becomes not only the standard, but the expectation for a community it creates a form of self-fulfilling prophecy regarding the natures and forms of Thai American culture and cuisine. Thai immigrants and Thai Americans alike are pigeonholed into the culinary world and service industry due to paths taken for the sake of survival. As Thai cuisine's fame and international renown grew, so did further expectation and standardization by American tastes and government stances, leaving the Thai diaspora on a narrow tightrope, characterized and forcibly bound to their exclusive form of cultural capital.

Transforming Thai cuisine into a marketable, standardized product has been an undeniable success, but this reputation is a double-edged sword. Thai people and Thai culture are robbed of its depth when understanding of culture is purely based on marketable culinary products and cuisine. I truly love my people's cuisine, and I love it when people love Thai food, but there is far more to Thai people and Thai culture than the food that everyone knows about.

Knowledge of a culture goes far beyond consumption of a tailored product, and as other cuisines rise in recognition this ignorance of the greater cultures creating these dishes become all the more prevalent. Resisting the urge to simplify and categorize a community under certain products such as cuisine is vital to giving the culture and people behind it the respect they deserve. Expanding one's palate for culture and cuisine allows communities a chance to grow and evolve past preconceived notions, freeing communities such as Thai Americans from restrictive and reductionist characterization.

Thai Americans and immigrants alike have been forced into narrow categorization and characterization and service and culinary laborers, a path once taken as a means for survival becoming the expectation and sole form of cultural understanding for the Thai diaspora in the United States. As American expectation and government oversight continue to simplify and dictate the narrative regarding Thai cultural and culinary identity, Thai people are often forced to appease external sensibilities over their own and bind themselves almost exclusively into a perceived and restrictive definition of "Thai culture", commodifying what was once a form of community and cultural expression. Thai culture, Thai cuisine, and Thai people exist outside the standards put into place by both the Thai government and American expectations, and while food has undeniably shaped the diaspora both in Thailand and beyond, the community and culture exists far beyond the scope of cuisine, and Thai Americans deserve to exist and showcase themselves beyond those strict boundaries.

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