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Thai Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Approaches and Purposes ^[1]

Thailand adopted what can be classified as “public diplomacy” during the Cold War period, primarily to improve its national image through informative communication toward the foreign publics by promoting its cultural heritage and tourism. Public diplomacy came to gain more attention in Southeast Asia in the 21st century, driven in part by global trends and the aims to promote attractiveness for investment, exports and tourism. Thailand is no exception in this regard. This article specifically asks: What approach has Thailand taken to pursue public diplomacy in the 21st century? The answers aim to provide a preliminary understanding of Thailand’s contemporary public diplomacy, primarily in terms of approaches and purposes.

Thai Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century

The Thailand rolled out new, albeit vaguely defined public diplomacy efforts, though still not spelled out clearly, started in the early 2000s. Under the Thaksin Shinawatra government,

Thailand was actively promoting tourism and Thai cuisine, as demonstrated in “Amazing Thailand” and the “Thai Kitchen to the World” Initiatives. The tourism initiative was a step-up of earlier periodical tourism campaigns, highlighted by the Visit Thailand Year under the “Welcome to Thailand” banner launched in 1987. The Thai Kitchen initiative represented a brand new one aiming to promote Thai food and restaurants overseas, which was eventually expected to increase agricultural exports.

The “Bangkok Fashion City” campaign and the “Bangkok Film Festival” strove to upgrade the Thai apparel and film industries, as well as to boost Thailand’s overall reputation. Meanwhile, sister cities programs were being promoted between Thailand and neighboring countries to foster cordial relations across borders. The initiative also had some economic implications in terms of border trade and contract farming. Overall, economic objectives were central to these policies which was understandable, considering Thailand was eager to recover from the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Two key organizations emerged: the Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), established in 2004, and the Thailand Foundation, which was launched in 2007. TICA is comparable to Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). As its income expanded, Thailand emerged as a new donor country that provided assistance to less developed countries. The Thai government established the Thailand Foundation to conduct public diplomacy, modeled after the Japan Foundation and Korea Foundation but lacking their same resources.


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From the mid-2000s until recently, Thailand was embroiled in a lengthy political crisis, resulting in many large-scale protests and two military coups. Public diplomacy thus focused on defending and explaining the situations to foreign governments and the public, with the key message that Thailand is still conducive to tourism and investment. Meanwhile, the Abhisit Vejjajiva government launched the “creative economy” initiative in the late 2000s to promote the content industry and soft industries. The attempt floundered due to limited budget, political instability and the short-lived government. Yet, Thailand continued its tourism success throughout the 2010s, peaking at 39 million in 2019, the year before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Current Efforts

In the 2020s, there emerged a new theme in Thai public diplomacy: the promotion of “Thai soft power.” The popularity of a Thai national named Lisa Manoban from the renowned Korean girl group “Black Pink” in 2021 brought momentum to Thai soft power promotion. Brand Finance ranked Thailand 35 in the world in soft power in 2022. In recent years, the nation has been eager to promote its soft power, which is intertwined with public diplomacy. The previous Prayut Chan-o-cha government emphasized Thailand’s “5Fs”: Food, Film, Festival, Fighting and Fashion

. The current Srettha Thavisin government has placed an even greater emphasis on soft power, advocating it as a major policy, now encompassing 11 industries, including gaming, music, books, art and design. Modeled under the Korea Creative Content Agency (KOCCA), the Thailand Creative Culture Agency (THACCA) is being created to take charge of cultural promotion and content development. Interestingly, pop culture like movies and series is getting more attention. By and large, the Thai soft power primarily means the promotion of culture and tourism, as economic gains continue to be the main goal.

With regard to public diplomacy specifically, in 2015, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs renamed one of its units to the Public Diplomacy Information Division to reaffirm the importance of the practice. Engagement with both foreign and domestic publics remains central to its mission . The Division's recent efforts include utilizing social media, while the Thailand Foundation inaugurated the "Public Diplomacy Award" in 2022 to honor non-state actors or individuals who constructively interact with foreign publics. In short, after two decades of gradual public diplomacy efforts, the Thai government has accelerated those initiatives.

Conclusion

Although Thailand has stepped up its efforts in public diplomacy in the 21st century, economic purposes remain central, particularly in terms of marketing its culture, food and tourism. Meanwhile, newly created and restructured agencies are taking charge of promoting international contribution and reputation. Recently, Thai public diplomacy has been associated with soft power promotion. Yet, it still seems to focus on culture and tourism, not much on values or foreign policy.
