

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Comparative Case Study: Culinary Soft Power Strategies of Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and Spain

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 22, 2025	This study examines the role of culinary soft power as a strategic instrument in national tourism and hospitality development. Employing a comparative qualitative case study approach, the research analyzes how Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and Spain integrate gastronomy into tourism policy, destination branding, and hospitality systems. Drawing on policy documents, UNESCO heritage frameworks, tourism statistics, and academic literature, the findings reveal that successful culinary soft power strategies depend on institutional coordination, cultural recognition, coherent branding narratives, and integration with broader cultural exports. While Thailand demonstrates strong global recognition through street food culture and culinary diversity, it lacks centralized governance and formal heritage recognition compared to the other cases. The study contributes to tourism and hospitality scholarship by positioning food culture as a multidimensional asset shaping destination identity, international perception, and long-term competitiveness, offering policy implications for sustainable culinary tourism development.
Accepted: Dec 17, 2025	
Keywords	
Culinary Soft Power Gastronomy Tourism Hospitality Management Destination Branding Cultural Diplomacy Comparative Case Study	
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INTRODUCTION

Cuisine is now a significant element of cultural diplomacy, where national identity, values, and traditions are expressed through taste, presentation, and experience. As discussed in Nye's (2004) paper, his theory of soft power suggests that preferences, goodwill, and indirectly determining geopolitical relations can be influenced through non-coercive cultural exports, such as cuisine. Therefore, one can consider food diplomacy an instrument of economic and cultural influence, as it not only enhances a country's image on an international scale but also increases tourism and commerce (Strugar, 2016).

Thailand uses its cuisine to support its national branding efforts since time immemorial. Thai food is popular across the globe thanks to a sense of balance and traditional recipes such as Pad Thai, Tom Yum Goong, and Green Curry (Jeaheng et al., 2023). Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has been promoting culinary tourism using street food culture, cooking classes, and food festivals (Suvittawat et al., 2025). Although these have provided a good level of visibility, the strategy of Thailand is still disjointed as compared with more institutionalized approaches in Japan, South Korea, and Spain.

In this study, the culinary soft power strategy in Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and Spain is compared to achieve three goals:

1. Examine the institutional and policy frameworks that are behind culinary diplomacy.
2. Contrast branding, marketing, and tourism integration strategies.

3. Find the weaknesses in the strategy of Thailand and recommend how to increase its culinary soft power.

Food is also regarded as the type of diplomacy as such a tool of diplomacy the edible one can convey the cultural values, history, and national identity through taste, presentation and tradition. Cuisine can be considered a practical and emotionally impacting tool, in the situation where countries compete using their soft power in a global context. As the theory of soft power by Nye (2004) observes, such non-coercive cultural exports as cuisine can influence preferences, create goodwill, mutual understanding, and shape indirectly the geopolitical relations. Food diplomacy therefore has emerged as not only a means of economic and tourism expansion but also a soft one at that in improving an international status of a nation as well as enhancing its culture imprint (Strugar, 2016).

Thailand has traditionally been one of the countries to use its food-related traditions as a key foundation of its national image. Thai cuisine is popular due to its rich palette of flavor, aromatic herbs and colorful staging. This food is considered to be the most popular in the world because it is difficult to imagine its absence on any menu. Pad Thai, Tom Yum Goong and Green Curry are some iconic dishes that have gained a lot of popularity even in other countries to the extent of becoming cultural food ambassadors to the country (Jeaheng et al., 2023). Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has been keen on incorporating gastronomies in its tourism promotions, with particular focus on street foods culture, native food specialties, and participation in traditional cooking classes as among the most important attractions to visiting tourists (Adisak Suvittawat et al., 2025). Such strategy fits with the rest of the cultural diplomacy of Thailand, and focuses on hospitality, authenticity and sensory pleasure.

Nevertheless, this high level of culinary brand exposure lacks a dedicated, top-down approach as can be seen in the campaigns orchestrated in Japan, South Korea and Spain making it quite scattered and responsive to the food category to date. Such nations have institutionalized their food diplomacy into long-term policy frameworks, global liaisons and the certification systems, which guarantees continuity of message, quality assurance, and the long-term cultural impact within the global markets.

Washoku, Hansik, and Mediterranean cuisine of Spain all belong to structured, well-underpinned by policies food promotion models that have been proven to work to raise national images. This comparative research will see the determination of the best practices applied by the countries as well as determine gaps in the approach applied in Thailand. In particular, it will be dealing with the following objectives:

Look into the domain of policy and institutional frameworks underpinning the promotion of culinary in each of the countries.

Contrast branding, marketing and integration with strategies of tourism.

Determine what Thailand is lacking in and suggest what recommendations could be made to make Thai culinary soft power more powerful.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the methodology, Section 3 presents the results, Section 4 discusses implications, and Section 5 concludes with recommendations.

METHODOLOGY

The present study takes the form of a qualitative comparative case study to be able to examine the national contexts in-depth and in a structured fashion. The four cases of study are Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and Spain, and the selection was based on three primary parameters, namely, the international reputation and fame of their cuisines; the official records of them using food as the tool of soft power essentially; and finally, their heavy inclusion of the aspect of gastronomy in their overall tourism development plans. These criteria make sure that every case would not be only an example of successful culinary tradition but also illustrate different strategies of utilizing cuisine as a source of cultural influence.

The information used to compile this paper was a combination of official, academic, and industry information in order to offer credibility and thoroughness. Existing government policy texts and tourism board publications offered first-hand knowledge of the strategic orientation and enactment

of culinary diplomacy-related program and policy. Reports on intangible cultural heritages provided by UNESCO have also been reviewed to find out international recognitions and the measures put in place to preserve cultural heritages that would increase and improve the values of soft powers of each cuisine (Park et al., 2021). Theoretical background and historical support based on academic literature on culinary diplomacy and soft power were used, as well as quantitative aspects that measured tourism performance associated with gastronomy through international tourism statistics provided by United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Also, industry reports and media releases were assessed to know how the food brand of each country is internationally perceived and the manner in which it is promoted through various platforms.

This theoretical analysis of the work revolves around four dimensions. To begin with, the institutional framework, which addresses the questions of the existence of special governmental or semi-governmental bodies responsible in regard to culinary diplomacy and the level of cooperation between the fields of tourism, culture, and trade. Second, international attention, both in terms of formal global distinction such as UNESCO listing, awards in food, and international cultural diplomacy writ-large in or around food. Third, marketing and branding strategies, analysis of the stories and the images or the messages in promotional campaigns, the issue of media alliance, and the flexibility of branding to various markets. Fourth, tourism integration, which measures the integration of culinary experiences into wider tourism packages, the infrastructure to support culinary tourism (e.g., food markets and cooking schools) and the way the local food otherwise tradition ties in to the experience of the global visitor.

Notables collected data were coded with the help of themes in order to be compared with each other in a nuanced way. The findings based on this comparative approach contribute to the identification of recurrent patterns, best practices and areas where there are strategic gaps in ensuring that culinary diplomacy can better be applied to improve soft power and tourism outcomes.

RESULTS

Thailand

The top portion of food diplomacy actors in Thailand include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the Tourism Authority of Thailand. Among the most significant ones, there is the so-called Thai Select certification program, allowing the Thai restaurants overseas to prove their quality and observance of the traditional way of cooking, and thus, guaranteeing consumers that they can obtain an exotic experience (Rimpeekool et al., 2015). Furthermore, Thailand is conscious of food tourism as it offers tours and campaigns including Amazing Thailand: Amazing Taste that promotes tourist exploration of delicacies in the region, including Thailand beaches and culture festivals and temples.

The current advantage of the country is the availability and cheapness of its street foods culture, which has made Bangkok to be iconic in itself and people will even visit with the goal of doing street food. Thai food is well known to strike a balance in sweetness, sourness, saltiness and spiciness and Thai foods can be found in restaurants all over the world with Thai delights such as Pad Thai, Tom Yum Goong, and Green Curry being diner familiar names. Nevertheless, even though the Thai cuisine is a popular dish, it could not become a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage at an earlier time than Washoku, which is a delay to legalizing its cultural display. In addition, disjointed coordination among the agencies in certain cases causes duplication of efforts and Brand watering. Institutional integration at a higher level would assist Thailand in locating its cuisine strategically on the international scene.

Japan (Washoku)

Not only is the Washoku now a national symbol in Japan but got recognized by UNESCO in 2013 after putting it in the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Cang, 2018). Not only does this recognition serve to honor the culinary tradition of Japan but also brings home the larger objective of the government that is preservation and export of culture. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries collaborates with the tourism boards, the best-known chefs in Japan and other institutions in the world so that Washoku is purposed not only as food but as the way to integrate with nature, time and society.

The Japanese government places a lot of investment in the educational system of culinary training in and outside countries meaning they provide scholarships, cultural exchange programs and even sponsor Japanese restaurants in other countries. The tie-in of the campaign to world movements in health and sustainability points out the focus on fresh, seasonal ingredients and aesthetics of presentation intrinsic to Washoku. Further, food promotion alongside other export products, including anime, traditional arts, and wellness tourism, form Japan by layering a narrative that appeals to various people. Such measures have played an important role in upgrading Japanese cuisine to a high-end cultural export product whose symbolism is high.

South Korea (Hansik)

In South Korea, the Hansik strategy is organized around a central body, the Korean Food Promotion Institute, (previously the Korean Food Foundation) which allows for coherent branding, messages, and quality enforcement of the South Korean food image (Cha, 2023). The strategy does not merely focus on food; the deliberateness has also been aimed at the rest of the "Hallyu" (Korean Wave) cultural export trend phenomenon that integrates cuisine with K-pop, K-drama, Korean beauty, and fashion trends that have swept the world. By contextualizing Hansik along these cultural exports, the government has brought forth the Korean food as a mode of life rather than as an eating choice.

One of the key components of this strategy is culinary tourism which is marketed with Korea Tourism Organization experiences (hands-on cooking schools, temple cuisine workshops, street food tours, and food festivals around the country). Vegetarian and vegan approaches in the temple food, especially, attract the attention of a wide range of customers worldwide concerned with sustainability, wellness, and veganism. Fermentation, the focus of Korean cooking (with famous products, such as kimchi or doenjang) also appeals to health-wise consumers in other parts of the globe.

Through the use of pop culture success, displaying the health value of the food, and making the promotion of foods as an official institution by creating a specific national organization, South Korea has created a cohesive, aspirational, and globally identifiable brand for Hansik (Hong, 2024). This diversified approach makes Korean food to be relevant and appealing to various people across continents.

Spain (Mediterranean Cuisine)

Spain uses the Mediterranean diet, which is listed in the UNESCO list of the intangible heritage of humanity, as one of the key items in its touristic and cultural branding (Trichopoulou, 2021). This has underlined not just the eating-well credentials of the diet in its scientifically-proven health benefits but also the fresh, seasonal and regional approach plus its long cultural connections, another image that fits the destination of Spain as one offering both hedonism and health. The Spanish government together with regional governments works intensively with starred chefs under Michelin, the most reputable gastronomic schools and wine producers to create a gourmet tourism experience in the world (Tormo-Santamaria et al., 2023).

Gastronomic tours like the wine trail along La Rioja, seafood themed routes in Galicia and the olive oil trails in Andalusia combine a love of food with stunning scenery, picturesque villages and historical monuments dating back centuries (Tormo-Santamaria et al., 2023). These may take the form of farm visits, vineyard tastings and cooking demonstrations, further enlightening visitors on local cuisine. Such food festivals (including the famous worldwide La Tomatina, or the high-profile San Sebasti Fern Gastronomika and a lot of regional harvest festivals) also contribute to the cultural status and variety of Spanish cuisine.

Through the use of gastronomy in terms of art, architecture, music and history, Spain can place its food culture as entailing aspects of a luxury experience and an active cultural heritage (Tormo-Santamaria et al., 2023). This integrated strategy has assisted Spain in holding on to its position as one of the best tourist destinations in the world in regards to offering immersive and multi-sensory food experiences.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis displays that Japan, South Korea, and Spain have advanced their culinary soft power by surrounding cuisine within structured governance, cultural credit, and tourism

frameworks. Japan's UNESCO recognition of Washoku highpoints how policy formalization secures global legitimacy (Cang, 2018). South Korea's centralized Korean Food Promotion Institute proves the effectiveness of coordinated branding linked with broader cultural exports such as K-pop and film (Cha, 2023; Hong, 2024). Spain has leveraged its UNESCO-listed Mediterranean diet by linking cuisine to luxury tourism, art, and regional identity (Trichopoulou, 2021). Thailand's strong point lie in its globally recognized street food culture, affordability, and rich culinary diversity. However, these assets are underutilized due to disjointed coordination and lack of established frameworks. The Thai Select program provides quality assurance abroad, but it lacks integration with broader cultural descriptions and long-term international promotion strategies.

Key lessons for Thailand include

- Starting a central Culinary Promotion Institute to organize policies and branding.
- Seeking UNESCO recognition for Thai cuisine to raise its heritage status.
- Mixing culinary diplomacy with modern cultural exports such as film, music, and well-being of tourism.

By approving these best practices, Thailand can elevate its cuisine from a prevalent tourist attraction to a symbol of national uniqueness and a strategic resource for social diplomacy.

A comparative analysis of the four cases, Thailand, Japan, South Korea and Spain, highlights towards the fact that the most archly successful methods of soft power culinary approaches have been created through institution building, cultural recognition and entrenchment of gastronomic undertones of diverse sectors. The importance of formalization of food diplomacy due to the organized governmental and industry-initiated efforts is demonstrated by the success of Japan in gaining the UNESCO recognition over Washoku and the policy frame within which the processes took place comprehensively. Similarly, the establishment of a Giuseung promotional institution by South Korea is a testimony that a systematic organization can be employed to communicate the same message, establish international cooperation and provide market power (Lee, 2021). The third horizon is illustrated in the case of Spain, since the country highlights its gastronomic heritage at the expense of the luxury tourism, turning the gastronomic culture into an economic advantage, and improving its cultural image in the international terms at the same time.

In comparison, Thailand excels at cooking (its street food culture, affordability, and its world recognizability) but all those qualities do not seem to be used in an effective way and affect its formal brand promotion in any way. Programs such as Thai Select offer a foretaste of authenticity accreditation abroad; however, they do not access the generative culture tales, inter-sector partnership and long-term promotion strategy that is a sidekick to Japan and South Korea. Thailand can use several best practices to achieve a superior position. These include establishing a central Thai Culinary Promotion Institute to organize policy efforts and co-ordinate tourism and branding programs; an aggressive campaign to win UNESCO recognition of Thai food or certain of its art forms; an attempt to integrate culinary promotion with other modern Thai cultural exports such as film, music and wellness tourism; and a massive development of culinary tourism education and training of chefs and culinary joint ventures to create both country expertise and popularity abroad.

CONCLUSION

In this comparative case study, it is clear that although Thailand can proudly say they have a vivid and well-known food brand, they do not have the institutional arrangement, and policy integration processes, which have proven invaluable in enhancing the use of soft power through food in other countries like Japan, South Korea and Spain. By situating their cuisines in more extensive heritage, governance, and tourism systems, these nations have managed to turn their cuisines, which were initially considered popular attractions, to strategic resources of cultural diplomacy.

In order to survive in the current context of international relations and make the best use of its international presence, Thailand has to shift its policy of using tourism as the key element to a complete cultural diplomacy approach. These would include formalizing the process of culinary promotion through the establishment of special government agencies, harmonizing Thai gastronomy with other international cultural heritage programs like UNESCO recognition, creating long-term relationships with international agencies, universities and key culinary networks.

With the major emphasis on what we can learn with best practices of the comparator countries (i.e., formal system of recognition and preservation of heritage of gastronomic traditions, centralized system of governance and brand management, harmonious combination of cuisine and luxury tourism and cultural branding that exists in Japan, South Korea, and Spain respectively), Thailand has ambitions to become a leader in gastronomic soft power. By making such a shift, the Thai cuisine would not only cease to be an aesthetic travel attraction that people love to taste, but it would become a key element of national identity, culture, cultural representation, and global power on the international level.

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