

## **The Globalization of Thai Cuisine**

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### **Introduction**

Globalization literature underscores the flows of people, information, technologies, capital and ideas across national borders (Appadurai 1996). The contact between cultures following these transnational flows has resulted in the widespread exchange and transformation of cultural forms (Appadurai 1996, Featherstone 1995). Responding to the call from some transnationalism and globalization writers, such as Cook and Crang, for the need to ground globalization theory in specific empirical materials, this paper seeks to analyze globalization through the mundane, everyday consumption of food and drink, and by following a form of cultural commodity – Thai food, or Thai cuisine – on its transnational routes. I start by giving a historical overview of how Thai food has become internationalized and has reached a global audience in cosmopolitan cities around the globe. Based on empirical observation of Thai restaurants in Vancouver, I explore the processes Thai cuisine has undergone when it enters transnational space and serves a global clientele. My field research reveals that Thai restaurants in a North American city highlight the authenticity of the Thai taste while at the same time adapting to local food customs.

Although creative adaptation by ethnic restaurants in metropolitan cities might have led us to imagine endless fusion and hybridity of cultural forms, I would like to point out that there is no ‘pure culture’ to mix. Selected forms of Thai food along various class lines and among regional diversity are constructed as “Thai cuisine” and promoted internationally. This process reflects internal hierarchy behind the formation of “Thai-ness” among Thais as well as the influence of the international market in which Thai culture is selling. The rising popularity of Thai food at the global level boosts national pride among Thais who often take “national image” seriously. Reified “Thai-ness” has been endorsed by the state in promoting the country’s tourism industry and recently in the internationalization of Thai food where, again, Thai culture has been marketed worldwide.

### **Historical Overview**

Although most people believe in the uniqueness of authentic Thai traditional cooking, Thai cuisine has been a product of transnational interactions for centuries. What is known as Thai food today is in fact a combination of indigenous foods and the influences of Indian and Chinese culinary traditions. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Khmer cooks introduced Indian food – such as curries and boiled red and white sweets – to Ayuttaya’s court. Fish sauce, which is a condiment and crucial ingredient in almost every Thai dish, is a Chinese invention. Earlier contact with Western cultures in the 17<sup>th</sup> century left a culinary legacy in Kanom Thong Yip, a Thai dessert modified from a French or Portuguese dish. Chilies were introduced by the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and in combination with fish sauce, galangal, and lime, they give a distinctive flavor to Thai dishes today.

## **The Increasing Popularity of Thai Cuisine Internationally**

Thai cuisine was not widely served outside of Thailand until the past few decades. A large number of foreign visitors were first exposed to Thai food in the 1960s, the beginning of the international tourism industry in Thailand. American servicemen experienced Thai food while in the country on R & R trips during the Vietnam War. Thai restaurants overseas began as sources of local food for Thai immigrants in London, Chicago, New York and Los Angeles; by the early 1990s there were over two hundred Thai restaurants in Los Angeles alone (Van Esterik 1992: 183). In the 1970s, there were only four Thai restaurants in London (Bhumichitr, Watcharin 1988) but now two to three hundred restaurants are serving Thai food in the city.

Although Thai food has just begun to reach a global clientele, it has rapidly gained international popularity. According to a survey on cuisine perception conducted by the Kellogg School of Management and Sasin Institute, Thai food is ranked at number four—after Italian, French, and Chinese—for the food that first comes to the minds of respondents when asked to name ethnic cuisines. It is ranked number six behind Italian, French, Japanese, Chinese, and Indian for the question “what is your favorite cuisine?” There are 6,875 Thai restaurants overseas as of 2003: 49% of them are in the United States and Canada; 20% are in Europe, 15% in Australia and New Zealand, 14% in Asia and 2% in other countries.<sup>1</sup> In part, Thai food attracts a Western audience as a healthy and non-fattening diet. The cover of a Thai cookbook published in the United States advertises Thai cuisine as “Healthful and slimming,” and describes it as “the newest exotic cuisine sweeping the country”

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<sup>1</sup> Export-Import Bank of Thailand

(Brennan 1981 in Van Esterik 1992: 177). Thai restaurants overseas might have begun as sources of local food for Thai immigrants but most Thai restaurants in metropolitan cities today market non-Thai customers, particularly Westerners in Europe and North America.

### **Mixing and Matching of Thai Food in Globalization**

One predominant theme that recurs in globalization discussion is fluidity and transformation of cultural forms in transnational space. As a result of global transactions, cultural forms in today's world are fundamentally fragmented and overlapping, possessing no static boundaries, structures, or regularities (Appadurai 1996: 46). Globalization produces the postmodern condition in which plurality, deformation, reformation, and blending challenge the notion of a singular culture bounded to a place or a group (Featherstone 1995).

Thai food, a representative of Thai culture, undergoes the processes of blending and reformation as it travels into transnational space. I noticed this transformation of food and service from my experience at Thai restaurants in Vancouver, and I interviewed two restaurant owners on their strategies in managing Thai restaurant businesses. Vancouver has a relatively small Thai community and its Thai restaurants mainly serve local (Canadian) clientele. According to two restaurant owners I interviewed, 85-90% of the clientele are Euro-Canadians, while 10-15% are Asians, of which only 0-1% are Thais. Although emphasizing the authentic Thai taste, Thai restaurants in Vancouver adapt the recipes, serving processes, and service systems to suit the local culture's dining customs. Adaptation is, according to restaurant owners, a necessary step they take to keep the business running.

Thai restaurants in Vancouver follow Western ways of serving a meal in courses: the dinner starts with an appetizer, usually soup or salad, followed by the main dishes. In the traditional style of Thai dining, all non-dessert dishes are served at the same time and are all considered main dishes. Soup and salad can be eaten with rice, constituting a main dish. A typical Thai meal may consist of two or three (or more, if time and budget allow) dishes of soup or curry and stir fried or deep fried dishes to share, with rice served in personal plates. Dishes that are put together should make a good combination, allowing various but harmonized flavors in a meal. My first experience eating in a Thai restaurant in Vancouver was with a Euro-Canadian friend and I was disappointed that I had to finish Tom Kha Kai soup and Larb Kai (minced chicken in spicy lime sauce) before the two main dishes and rice were served. A Thai restaurant owner in Vancouver explains that Euro-Canadians, the major clientele of the restaurant, are not accustomed to having soup with the main dishes and with rice. “They don’t like having soup with rice because it makes their dishes watery. We have to learn and adapt (to suit the taste of the customers).”

Having foreign customers in mind, Thai restaurants in Vancouver are careful in serving spicy food. Menus of Thai restaurants normally indicate the level of hotness for each dish, ranging from mild to very hot. Most restaurants have both English and Thai on the same menus but the Thai versions are usually in smaller print. Thai restaurants in Vancouver invented new dishes such as Tom Yam Pak or vegetable in Tom Yam soup. The dish is unheard of for most Thais because in Thailand Tom Yam is always cooked with chicken or seafood. As there are a significant number of vegetarians in North America, Thai restaurants adjust the recipe and substitute vegetables for chicken or seafood. Thai restaurants in Vancouver serve vegetarian spring rolls, while in Thailand spring rolls always have ground pork in

them. Other than providing more vegetarian choices, one restaurant indicates on its menu that all meat dishes can be substituted with tofu or vegetables. Thai restaurants overseas also adapt some recipes according to the availability of ingredients. For example, basil is substituted for Bai Krapao, an herb that is not always readily available in North America.

### **Overseas Thai restaurants and Transnational Flows**

Thai restaurants overseas is a form of transnational process and restaurant owners epitomize transmigrants who “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their society of origin and settlement” (Basch et al. 1994: 7). Although many of Thai restaurants are owned by non-Thai owners, ones that are well-established and highly recognized (those listed in Zagat survey Vancouver Restaurants) are run by Thai immigrants. I interviewed two well-established Thai restaurant owners who are Thai immigrants in Vancouver for their view and strategies in running Thai restaurant business. Prapat, the owner of Pranakorn Thai Restaurant, immigrated to Vancouver from Thailand in 1968. He opened Pranakorn in 1986 which became the first “real” Thai restaurant owned by a Thai in the city.<sup>2</sup> A year later, Suwana opened Baan Thai Restaurant in 1987 after immigrating to Vancouver in 1976. The two restaurants rely on the flows of knowledge, capital, and labour across national borders through connections the owners have in Thailand and Canada. Both Prapat and Suwana hire all Thai wait staff and recruit experienced cooks from Thailand. When in need of a new employee, Prapat asks his current Thai staff to introduce friends or relatives who might be interested in working in the restaurant. He found this strategy more efficient than posting an advertisement in a local

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<sup>2</sup> There had been a few restaurants that served Thai food owned by non-Thai owners at the time he started his business.

newspaper. Suwana gained recipes of some dishes at Baan Thai from Jit Pochana, a well-known Thai restaurant in Bangkok. Both Pranakorn and Baan Thai order ingredients (rice, fish sauce, coconut milk, etc.) as well serving dishes and decorative items from Thailand. Fresh ingredients are from local grocery retailers who import them from various countries, including Thailand. When opened the second branch of Baan Thai in 2003, Suwana ordered products such as decorative items, rattan chairs, and even menus from Thailand. That year she received PM award from the Thai Government House for importing Thai products to set up a business overseas.

Transnational flows are by no means free from national border regulations. Both Prapat and Suwana reveal that personnel shortage is the most challenging problem in running Thai restaurants in Vancouver. The two restaurants insist on hiring Thai wait staff and cooks so that their restaurants represent “real” Thai eating establishments. Prapat adds that he hires Thai staff also for efficient communication among them. Because the Thai community in Vancouver is relatively small, the restaurants face difficulties recruiting and training new staff, as well as providing current employees with adequate salary and benefits to motivate them to stay. Suwana sometimes has to work in the kitchen when a cook quits or takes leave. State mechanisms that regulate mobility of persons between national boundaries are still in place. Prapat mentions that gaining labour certificates and working visas for Thai cooks from Thailand is a complicated and time consuming process. He notes that the cost for setting up a Thai restaurant overseas is prohibitively high with major expenses going to rent, wages for employees, and taxes. The high starting up cost restrains many Thai investors from starting a Thai restaurant business overseas, particularly those with investment money in Thai currency which is worth much less than the currency in many destination countries.

## **Behind the Construction of the “Authentic Thai food”**

Globalization discussion that emphasizes hybridity and the mosaic model of the cultural mix is based on the assumption that all actors participate in the process equally, ignoring internal hierarchy among them. Cook and Crang (1996: 133) do not completely agree with this notion of a random cultural blend and argue for the consideration of complex contextualizations behind the “staging and (re)construction of cultural difference in a globalization of diversity.” Following this argument, I want to point out that the construction of “authentic Thai food” on the world stage is embedded in complex social and economic dynamics both within the nation state and in the transnational arena.

Fundamentally, the concept of national cuisine is an invented tradition. In his analysis of Indian cookbooks, Appadurai (1988) illustrates that class is an important factor that shapes the construction of Indian national cuisine. In a similar light, Wilk (1999) contends that “real Belizean food” is a recent invention created in the process of de-colonization and also in response to intrusive foreign cultures; he emphasizes that the meaning of national cuisine is changing and shifting over time. Thai national cuisine is also a construction and the “authentic Thai food” promoted internationally is a product of nationalism as well as the market economy.

### **“Authentic Thai food” and the International Market**

Although Thai restaurants overseas might have begun as sources of local food for Thai immigrants, most of them are now marketing foreigners. Menus of Thai restaurants overseas look more or less the same with similar lists of dishes that are already known internationally. A Thai restaurant owner in Vancouver reveals that he

modeled his menu on another Thai restaurant's in Seattle and the dishes he included are those that foreign customers know and like. He adds that customers tend to order the same dishes when they return to the restaurant. The Thai government seems to encourage Thai restaurants overseas to use uniform menus. At a seminar organized by the Thai government as part of the project "Kitchen of the World" that aims at promoting Thai restaurant business overseas, Ajarn Amaraporn Wongphak, a speaker from Suan Dusit University, provided a list of the 13 Thai dishes that are most popular among foreigners. In order, these are: Padthai, Roast Duck Curry, Tom Kha Kai, Pork Satay, Tom Yam Ghoong, Catsheew nut Chicken, Chicken Green Curry, Kang Panaeng, Pad Kra-Prao, Tod Mun, Yam Nua, Gai Haw Bai Teuy, Gai Yaang, and Som Tam. These dishes are on almost every overseas Thai restaurant's menu while other everyday food for Thais such as Nam Prig (Chili paste of various ingredients), Kaeng Som (spicy and sour fish-based soup with vegetables), or Lon (fermented soybean in coconut milk) are not available. These dishes have strong smell and are not favorable to most foreign customers and therefore do not appear in the international market. As the globalization of Thai food is a market driven process, "Thai food for foreigners" or "Thai food that sells abroad" are promoted and represented as "Thai cuisine" on the world stage.

### **Class and Regional Diversity**

Thai restaurants overseas derive from Central Thai Bangkok cuisine in which regional cuisines are under-represented. Although Som Tam, Laab, Gai Yaang and Crying Tiger Beef are originally from the Northeast (Isan), they have been embraced in central Thai Bangkok restaurants due to internal migration of people from the Northeast to Bangkok. However, these northeastern dishes are modified and refined

when served in Bangkok restaurants (Van Esterik 1992: 183). The version of Larb, Som Tam, Gai Yaang, and Crying Tiger beef served in Thai restaurants overseas is the Bangkok Thai version of Isan food. These dishes are not recognized as regional varieties but represented as “Thai food” when presented to a global clientele.

Northern and Southern dishes do not integrate into Bangkok restaurants to the same extent as Isan food and therefore do not appear on overseas Thai restaurants’ menus. “Thai food” as promoted overseas reflects the hegemony of central Thai cuisine and glosses over regional diversity.

Thai restaurants in global cities that emphasize artful presentation of food and elaborate serving dishes are inevitably performing the class dimension of Thai food. As Van Esterik (1992: 185-186) points out, class differences in Thai cuisine are determined not in the food structure but in scale of elaboration; upper class cuisine or palace cuisine is distinguished by more dishes on the table, artful decoration that requires skill and time, and refined combination of tastes. “Thai food,” as presented globally, with the emphasis on elaborated presentation is therefore closer to upper class cuisine, while the advertisement of Thai restaurants overseas as a legacy of refined culinary art makes direct reference to palace cuisine. The “globalization of Thai food” often leads to the illusion of the homogeneity in Thai eating customs when only selected parts of them are represented.

### **Political Economy and the “Kitchen of the World” Project**

The Thai government has participated in the globalization of Thai cuisine. The current government under the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has launched the “Kitchen of the World” project, which aims at promoting Thai food in the international arena. The goal of the project is to increase the number of Thai

restaurants overseas from 6,875 (in 2003) to 20,000 in 2008. The government encourages Thai investors to invest in Thai restaurants overseas and provide support in the forms of training, information, and financial loans. As of 2004, the Thai government had approved a 500 million baht budget for the project and held a seminar on November 16, 2004 at Merchant Court Hotel, Bangkok, for interested individuals. Officials in the government hope that the project will generate foreign income not only from the sales of food and service overseas but also from adding value to agricultural and food products which have been Thailand's leading exports. In promoting Thai cuisine internationally, the government prioritizes standardization and quality. One of the government's procedures to control the standard of Thai restaurants overseas is awarding the "Thai Select" label to qualified restaurants. Thai Airways International and the Tourism Authority of Thailand will be the government's agents in charge of selecting qualified Thai restaurant overseas. Thai Airways International<sup>3</sup> will transport food items from Thailand to Thai restaurants in destination countries to guarantee freshness of food products.

### **Tourism and the Globalization of Thai cuisine**

The internationalization of Thai food and the Thai tourism industry are overlapping and interrelated. Thai restaurants in global cities utilize touristic discourse that relies on the commodification of experience and escape from the mundane (MacCannell 1976, Urry 1989). Metropolitan customers who dine in an ethnic restaurant consume not only food but also the experience of being and eating there (Bell & Valentine 1997). Thai restaurants in world cities are decorated in ways that emphasize Thai culture and create Thai atmosphere; they display Thai classical

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<sup>3</sup> Thai Airways International is Thailand's national airline in which the government is the major shareholder.

paintings, sculptures, silk curtains, Buddha images, and pictures of people and places in Thailand. Most Thai restaurants play Thai music and serve food in blue and white wares. Some restaurants serve food in wooden bowls and use banana leaves to decorate their dishes while wait-staff walk around in traditional Thai clothes. Take-out menus of a Vancouver Thai restaurant read:

Amazing Thai Food: Come experience Vancouver's finest flavors of Thailand. Our exotic dishes are cooked with the freshest ingredients by our Thai chefs, and served by our friendly staff in a truly traditional atmosphere.

“Amazing Thailand,” or the “Amazing Thailand Year,” was the slogan of the Thai tourism campaign in 1998. It was used to suggest that eating in a Thai restaurant in Canada would offer the same wonderful experience as traveling in Thailand.

### **The Globalization of Thai Food and Thai Cultural Nationalism**

The popularity of Thai food in the international arena boosted nationalism among Thais and the state embraces this nationalist sentiment to market Thai culture overseas. Iwabuchi (2002) uses the term “soft nationalism” to refer to the narcissistic discourse developed among a group of people who celebrate the realization that their group identity has been accepted or recognized outside the group. Thai “soft” nationalism has grown according to the commodification of Thai culture, particularly in the form of tourism, the industry that constitutes the country's major revenue. Craig Reynolds (1998) notes that Thai cultural nationalism developed from the marketing of Thai culture overseas has resulted in the phenomena wherein Thai nationals take up the image of the country sold to foreigners as their self-identity. The recognition of Thai cuisine overseas has shown a similar impact of cultural

nationalism as in Thai tourism. Thai media support the promotion of Thai food abroad and set up a distinction between authentic Thai restaurants and pseudo-Thai restaurants run by non-Thai owners. There is a public concern that under-qualified, pseudo-Thai restaurants serve “distorted, less than authentic Thai food” and will potentially damage the reputation of Thai cuisine in the eyes of foreigners. A columnist of a local newspaper in Thailand expresses his concern of Thai food overseas and his support for the Kitchen of the World project:

The biggest problem of Thai food overseas today is the fact that there are numerous Thai restaurants run by non-Thai owners that produce the imitation of Thai food. Foreigners who eat in these restaurants misunderstand that the pseudo Thai food is actually the Thai taste and the real Thai taste (in a real Thai restaurant) is not authentic. It's time to let the world experience real authentic Thai food. ([www.thairath.co.th/thairath1/2546](http://www.thairath.co.th/thairath1/2546))

## **Conclusion**

The construction of “Thai food” on the global stage is a process that involves various actors who interact at different levels. It demonstrates that cultural transformation, hybridization, and creolization in the globalized world are not context free and there is always complex dynamics behind the perceived cultural mix. In the globalization of Thai food, business owners and recently the Thai government are active agents who shape the representation of Thai food globally. The process is market driven with the emphasis on selling Thai culture to foreign customers. This international commodification of Thai culture has in turn promoted cultural nationalism among Thais. As in the Thai tourism campaign, the globalization of Thai cuisine supported by the government reflects the role of the state in guiding and

stimulating cultural nationalism. Cook and Crang (1996) rightly point out that it is more productive to connect culture to political economy. The internationalization of Thai cuisine demonstrates that cultural globalization and economic globalization are complexly intertwined and need to be examined simultaneously.

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