

Thailand's Soft Power Evolution: Nurturing Global Influence through Creativity

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1. Introduction

In the realm of international relations, the concept of soft power, popularized by Professor Joseph Nye, has emerged as a defining force, emphasizing the ability of nations to wield influence through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye, 2004). Rooted in a country's culture, political ideals, and foreign policies, soft power has become a potent force in international relations. Thailand, a nation rich in culture and heritage, has long been recognized as a player in the soft power arena.

The Thai government has recognized the potential of leveraging its cultural heritage and distinct tourist attractions to bolster its soft power on the world stage. Efforts to develop the country's creative economy began to take shape in the early 2000s. Organizations such as the Tourism Development Office, Thailand Creative and Design Center, and Software Industry Promotion Agency were established to spearhead initiatives related to the creative economy. These organizations serve as a foundation for the long-term development of the creative industry, aligning with Thailand's broader economic goals.

In 2022, the Thai government announced a renewed focus on soft power promotion, with an emphasis on using culture to cultivate creative skills and generate economic value as well as to strengthen its global presence and competitiveness.

However, recent shifts in rankings and challenges in preserving cultural authenticity highlight the need for Thailand to reassess and refine its approach to soft power cultivation. As the global landscape evolves, Thailand must adapt its strategies to effectively leverage its cultural assets and enhance its soft power influence on the world stage.

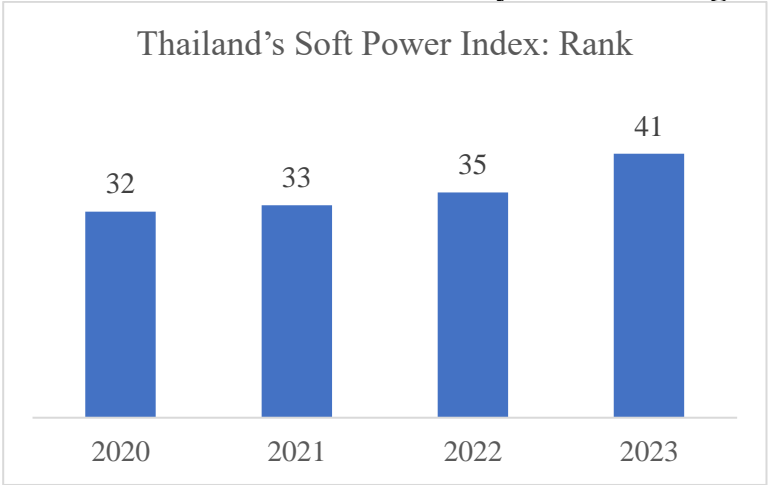
2. Thailand's Soft Power Ranking Decline

According to the Global Soft Power Index, Thailand's soft power ranking has experienced a decline, sliding from 32nd in 2020 to 41st in 2023, as illustrated in Figure 1.

In 2023, while the nation possesses strengths in areas such as business and trade, culture and heritage, and people and values, with scores ranging from 4.3 to 4.8 out of 10, there exist notable deficiencies in education and science,

governance, media and communication, and international relations, with scores falling between 2.6 and 3.4 (See Figure 2).

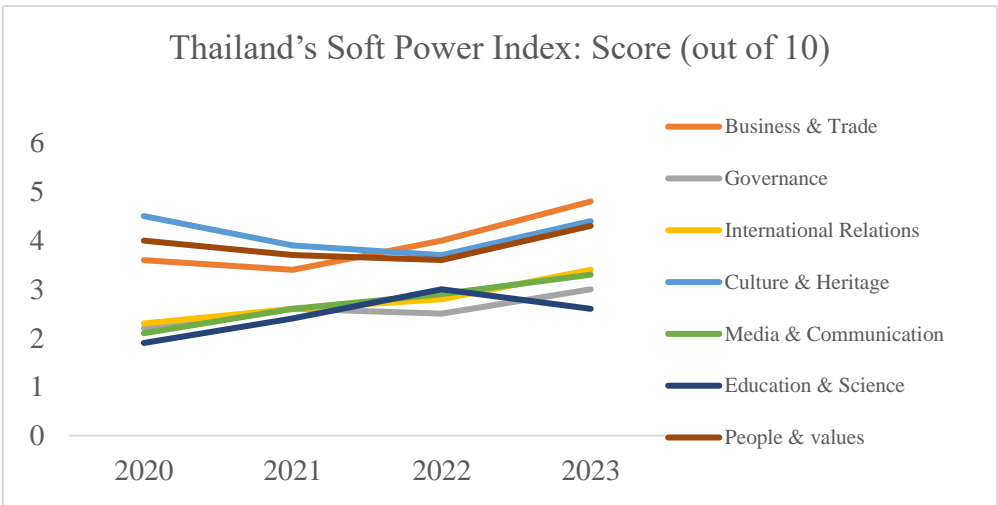
Table 1: Thailand’s Soft Power Index by Rank during 2020-2023



Note: Number 1 denotes the top position, indicating the world’s most influential nation in terms of soft power.

Source: Global Soft Power Index (Various years)

Table 2: Thailand’s Soft Power Index by Score in 2023



Source: Global Soft Power Index (Various years)

In contrast, the top five soft power superpowers, comprising the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and China, exhibit formidable dominance across key contributors to soft power. These include robust business environments, strong and stable economies, influential governance structures, positive international relations, rich cultural legacies, effective media and communication platforms, leadership in education and scientific research, and admirable societal values.

For example, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan are renowned for iconic products and brands such as Apple, Rolls-Royce, and Toyota, a level of prominence Thailand currently lacks, notably absent from the top 100 brand rankings. Furthermore, their dedication to democratic governance is evident, along with fostering positive international relations through financial aid and scholarships to other nations. These countries boast rich cultural contributions, such as Hollywood's influence in the U.S., literary works like Harry Potter in the U.K., and Japanese cultural exports like Manga. Effective media and communication channels, including renowned outlets like CNN, BBC, and NHK, bolster their global influence. Moreover, educational and scientific achievements are exemplified by institutions like Harvard University in the U.S. and Oxford University in The U.K., whereas Thailand lacks representation in the top 500 universities globally. Admired values such as rights and freedom in the U.S. and U.K., and trustworthiness in Japan, further contribute to their soft power standing.

3. Cultural Attractiveness and Creative Industries

To enhance its soft power, Thailand must emphasize the critical factors contributing to its attractiveness. The nation's allure stems from its rich cultural tapestry, evident in vibrant traditions, architecture, and culinary delights. Despite a decline in foreign tourist arrivals from 39.9 million in 2019 to 28.2 million in 2023, Thailand still ranks among the top ten in international tourism receipts for 2020, according to data from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports and World Bank.

Culture and heritage play pivotal roles intricately linked with the country's creative industries, significantly contributing to Thailand's GDP. In 2020, the creative industries accounted for a substantial 7.6% of GDP, totaling 1.2 trillion baht, and employed approximately 1 million individuals.

However, Thailand encounters the challenge of maintaining a delicate balance between preserving its tradition and embracing innovation within its creative industries. The trajectory of Thailand's creative industries, as estimated by Rattanakhomfu et al. (2021), hinges on its capacity to integrate technology. Embracing innovation holds the potential to catalyze growth, propelling the nation towards a more dynamic and competitive global position. Their projections suggest that without embracing innovation, the forecasted Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) stands at 2.1% from 2025 to 2030. In contrast, a transformation aligned with technological advancements could elevate the CAGR to an impressive 4.5%.

4. Learning from KOCCA's Successful Model¹

Learning from the successful model of South Korea's KOCCA (Korea Creative Content Agency) is essential for Thailand to develop comprehensive frameworks and navigate its creative industries' evolution effectively. With a mission to promote content business to make Korea a cultural powerhouse, South Korea prioritizes the integration of creative industry policies through KOCCA, which consolidates the Korea Broadcasting Agency, the Korea Game Industry Agency, and the Culture and Content Agency into a unified entity.

KOCCA's multifaceted approach to nurturing creative industries, which encompasses support for production, planning, creation, distribution, overseas expansion, business growth, training, R&D, policy financing, and policy study, sets a precedent for effective industry support. It addresses industry needs comprehensively, spanning sectors such as games, animation, character, fashion, music, comics, and new technology convergence content. Additionally, KOCCA offers essential business services, including support for the growth of South Korea's creative industries beyond its borders, human resource development, and research on creative industries.

In the music industry, for example, KOCCA's initiatives range from talent development programs to funding initiatives for album production and international music exhibitions. Furthermore, KOCCA facilitates marketing through social media platforms, translates songs into foreign languages, and organizes networking events between artists and the business sector to expand business opportunities.

5. Strategies for a New Model of Creative Industries

To foster sustainable growth, Thailand must adopt strategies aimed at enhancing its global presence. Emphasizing better quality, innovation, and increased value-added responses to market demands through creative talent development and a supportive ecosystem is pivotal in driving the creative industries forward.

However, government support for Thailand's creative industries is currently fragmented across various agencies, lacking a cohesive strategy or mission-based approach, and often emphasizing short-term goals, such as organizing events or festivals, rather than prioritizing long-term goals like talent development and upgrading the creative industries to higher value-added activities (TDRI, 2022). Therefore, establishing a clear strategy and sustained plan is imperative for Thailand's creative industries to thrive. Additionally, the attitudes of some key agencies should be open-minded and conducive to creativity.

¹ Source: <https://www.kocca.kr/en/main.do>), accessed on January 10th, 2024.

For instance, consider the case of the developers of the game "Home Sweet Home" who requested information about “Thai musical instruments” and “Thai dance poses” from the Ministry of Culture to use as references in creating the game. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Culture refused to collaborate, expressing concerns that the game might harm Thai arts and culture and instill fear regarding Thai dance. As a consequence, the development team had to adjust the design of the character “Phi Nang Ram” and independently design all “Thai dance poses”.²

This incident underscores the need for greater collaboration and openness among government agencies to support and promote Thailand's creative industries effectively. It highlights the importance of fostering an environment where creativity can thrive and where government agencies work hand in hand with creative industries to leverage Thailand's cultural richness and innovation potential on the global stage.

6. New initiatives under the Current Government

Drawing inspiration from South Korea's successful model with KOCCA (Korea Creative Content Agency). The THACCA Initiative, led by PM Srettha Taweessin's government, represents a multifaceted approach to harnessing Thailand's soft power potential. Key measures include establishing THACCA as the primary overseeing organization, creating a Soft Power Mutual Fund, expanding the Thailand Creative and Design Center, revising laws, expediting license issuance, and promoting freedom of expression by removing censorship.

The introduction of the THACCA Bill marks a significant milestone, with a slated timeline for debate in the House of Representatives in April 2024 and passage in the Senate by October 2024, setting the stage for tangible progress in Thailand's creative landscape.

While the establishment of THACCA mirrors South Korea's KOCCA, the true measure of success lies in effective implementation. It is essential for THACCA to not only replicate KOCCA's structure but also imbibe its ethos of proactive industry support and innovation with a mission-oriented approach.

Additionally, the National Soft Power Strategy Committee (NSPSC), chaired by PM Srettha, acts as the national super board overseeing the promotion of the creative industries. This aims to solve the problem of fragmented working

² Source: <https://thematter.co/brief/130713/130713> (in Thai) and <https://thestandard.co/home-sweet-home-director-word-about-ministry-of-culture/#:~:text=TV%20%26%20Entertainment%20%2F%20POP-,ผู้กำกับเกม%20Home%20Sweet%20Home%20ซึ่งแจ้งว่าไม่ได้ถูกกระทรวง,11.12.2020> (in Thai), accessed on January 10th, 2024.

across various agencies in the private and the public sectors, including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Industry, the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Creative Economy Agency under the Office of the Prime Minister, and others.

The challenge facing this committee lies in integrating these interconnected sectors to collaborate effectively toward an objective-driven approach, rather than an activity-based one. Moreover, it must ensure efficient progress monitoring to align efforts toward shared goals. This task is particularly challenging due to the prevalent silo-based working style and the culture of activity-based approaches within public agencies.

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In summary, Thailand's soft power evolution has centered primarily on culture and heritage, yet it must broaden its scope to encompass other crucial factors such as education and science, governance, values of the people, business and trade, and international relations to bolster its soft power standing.

The creative industries should transcend traditional boundaries and prioritize substance, such as talent development and upgrading to high-value creative industries, over form like events or festivals, integrating technology where relevant. Vital to this transformation is nurturing creativity within the workforce, providing them with technological tools, and enacting strategic national policies with a focus on long-term goals.

To cultivate Thailand's creative industries, government agencies must adopt a mission-oriented approach, establish coherent strategies, invest in a skilled creative workforce, harness digital technology, and collaborate with educational institutions and the private sector. Government support is paramount for skill development, including funding for lifelong learning to facilitate opportunities for reskilling and upskilling, as well as providing facilities for creativity and networking. Encouraging highly skilled creative professionals from abroad to work in Thailand adds diversity and expertise.

Ultimately, by fostering partnerships with creative industries and embracing innovation, Thailand can position itself as a global leader in creativity and cultural expression. This endeavor requires the visionary government to deliver a clear and sustained plan, along with a strong commitment for the development of its creative industries.

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