

Culinary Colonialism and Thai cuisine: The Taste of Crypto-Colonial Power

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how state power is mobilized through food. From the state banquets organized by Siamese kings in the 1800s, to the promotion of carefully monitored Thai restaurants in North America and Europe, the Thai state uses food to manage the national image of the country. Royal style cuisine as developed under the kings of the Chakri dynasty has become the basis for an invented standardized national cuisine that bypasses much of the ethnic diversity in regional foods. Ironically, the Chakri dynasty's royal style of 'old Siam' is also reflected in the texts and films associated with Anna Leonowens and *The King and I*. The depiction of the state banquet in particular was one reason the books and films were banned in Thailand. Thai restaurants abroad often reproduce the royal style decor of 'old Siam' for customers. From the desire to appear *siwilai* (civilized, cf. Winichakul 2000) in the 1800s to the constant creativity of street foods, Thai meals provide occasions for both staged authenticity and genuine commensality. Using ethnographic, archival and historical sources, this paper explores why and how the Thai state exercises power through food, with particular attention to tourist food, taste socialization and the power of food to both represent and resist state power.

Nai naa mi khaw, nai nam mi plaa (In the fields, rice; in the water, fish)

These words from the inscription of 1292 have been attributed to Ramkhamheng, the ruler of the first Thai Kingdom of Sukhothai. Thus, the narrative of the Thai nation state begins with food. A righteous king (*dhammaraja*) feeds his people. If he cannot insure food security in his kingdom, subjects would seek another patron. Food sufficiency is not enough; patrons and clients alike demonstrate civility and relatedness through eating and feeding others. Political commensality has a long history in Thailand (Van Esterik, 1992). This paper explores how food and power are linked in the country.

Euro-American histories exhibit a long-standing bias against rice-based meals; nutritionists in 1947 made reference to meals consumed without meat as a 'coolie diet' (Belasco 2006, p. 43). These nutritionists encouraged the consumption of both milk and meat, and any cuisine not based around meat and milk was disparaged. What did foreigners think of Thai food in the 1800s? In 1688, Gervaise, a Catholic missionary from France wrote the following about Siamese food:

[...] there is no good meat that their stupid cooks do not spoil with the sauce they make. They mix with all their stews a certain paste made of rotten prawns...which has such a pungent smell that it nauseates anyone not accustomed to it [...] At banquets the dishes are served higgledy-piggledy and in no particular order, with fruit and rice in vessels of gold, silver and porcelain placed on bandages [...] They have no napkins or tablecloths and no forks and they only use their spoons, that are shaped very differently from ours [...] (1688 [1989], p. 88)

Colonizers often force the colonized to produce new food crops for export; at the same time, they may be repulsed by the food of the colonized other. Colonial powers considered the food of the other to be inedible, primitive, revolting and proof of the need to civilize the population through civilizing the palate, and encouraging the consumption of more milk and meat. The smell of Siamese fermented fish products were considered particularly disgusting.

When Sir John Bowring came to Bangkok to negotiate a treaty between Britain and Siam, King Mongkut gave him tea, local preserves, fruit, cigars and sweetmeats covered with banana leaves on his arrival, and provided coconuts, sugar, fowls, pigs, eggs and rice for his crew. On April 17, 1855, Bowring writes of a memorable lunch in Bangkok:

We found a lunch or tiffin laid out in perfect European taste, though the table was covered with Asiatic fruits and preserves. There were, however, American biscuits, and one dish at least that I tasted evidenced that the cuisine was (as I had heard reported) one of his Majesty's cares and that his cooks, if not Europeans, have at all events received European instructions. Everything was singularly neat and comfortable (Bowring, 1977, p. 109).

Some Europeans found the strange foods they encountered exotic and appealing, and were interested in trying new dishes and exploring unfamiliar tastes:

Many different kinds of salads and sweets, besides fish and meats were served. The sauces are a great feature in the cooking these being exceedingly rich and varied. All the dishes are placed on the table at once. No knives are used, only spoons and forks. All fresh fruit are stoned and peeled before being served. It is considered the height of bad manners to put anything on the plate which has been in the mouth. A small dish is placed on the floor at the

side of the diner's chair to receive that which is uneatable (Christies, 1911 p. xiii).

Although Siam interacted with Europeans, the country was never colonized. The state effectively controlled the interactions with colonial powers, including honouring them by serving them the Siamese versions of their own foods. Herzfeld (2002) uses the term crypto-colonialism to refer to countries like Thailand that were never colonized but behaved in relation to colonial powers. He argues that it is self-deception for any country to assume it can escape global structures of power. The Siamese state attempted to treat colonial powers such as Britain and France not as enemies of Siam but players on the same stage. British and French foods did not shape Thai cuisine. Even today, Thailand exhibits minimal culinary colonialism compared to fully colonized neighbours like Vietnam or Malaysia — countries whose cuisine demonstrates more evidence of direct colonial influence (cf. Laudan, 2013). Thai cuisine never had to reject foods from European countries. Instead, new food items and recipes from the west were easily absorbed into the cuisine and quickly considered local.

Nevertheless, colonial processes affected Thai cuisine. The Columbian exchange of foods between the Americas and the Old World included products like chili peppers, corn, and tomatoes. The hottest peppers associated with Thai food today, *prik kii nu* (mouse shit peppers) may have been brought from Mexico by Portuguese traders to the Kingdom of Ayuttaya in the early 1500s. However some historians think that although the Portuguese brought these peppers from Goa to Bengal around 1570, they did not reach Ayuttaya until much later (Muntarbhorn, 2007). These peppers, reaching 290 000 on the scoville scale, are likely a variant of Mexican serrano chilies. Before their adoption, the key source of heat was derived from a variant of black pepper, *prik Thai*, combined with ginger. Today, it is hard to imagine many Thai dishes without chilies. For example, *naem*, a northern Thai delicacy made from fermented raw pork, chilies and garlic, or *lap*, a spicy chopped meat dish from northeast Thailand would be unrecognizable without chilies.

Corn arrived in Asia from Mexico around the sixteenth century from the Portuguese. While it was integrated into Chinese and Japanese cuisines shortly thereafter, it was not grown commercially in Thailand until 1950. Today, most of the corn grown in Thailand is exported, mostly to Japan. Industrial food items like tinned biscuits, preserves, and canned meat made possible by new processing techniques invented in England (Goody, 1982), made the long sea voyage to Thailand. Food products with roots in colonial companies such as Dole, Peek Freans or Nestle have no monopolies in Thailand, and carry no colonial baggage. These Western food items are not considered colonial products, but rather unappealing bland foods from elsewhere, brought by others who attempted to colonize the country, but stayed for trade instead. The Portuguese settled in Ayuttaya in the 1500s, not

as a colonial power but as aggressive entrepreneurs and traders on their way to other colonies. Western influences on Thai cuisine are ancient but not colonial *per se*. Consider the popular but intricate egg yolk, rice flour, coconut and sugar-based desserts like *foy tong* (golden threads) based on the *ovos moles* (egg custard) from Portugal.

The Thai state emulated the colonizers by colonizing other parts of their own country, particularly the north and northeast, whose regional specialties shifted from the status of peasant food to gradually becoming considered part of central Thai cuisine.

State power and food

The Thai government propagates the historical narrative that the country remained independent of colonial power because of the negotiating skill of the Thai elites. The discourse was resurrected to explain how skilled diplomacy prevented Thailand being overrun by communism in the sixties. Often these negotiations involved food and feeding others. Here I present some evidence concerning how state power is mobilized through food, with a focus on four time periods.

- The state banquets of Rama IV, 1860s
- 'Eat Thai' campaigns of 1930s
- American presence and the cold war, 1960s
- 'Kitchen to the world', 2010 to present

The state banquet of Rama IV (1860s)

Commensality and communal eating events occur at the level of household as well as the state and reflect different scales of hospitality. But they inevitably provide evidence of the power of the sponsor - the provider of the food and orchestrator of the event. Some banquets disguise material and social inequalities with an egalitarian ethos. At Victorian banquets, the model for Siamese state banquets in the 1800s, hierarchy is visible and carefully manipulated.

In the 1860s, Siam was under threat from both French and British colonial expansion. French interests in Laos and Cambodia, and British control of Burma and Malaysia put Siam in a vulnerable position. King Mongkut (Rama IV) was under pressure to reduce tensions between colonial powers and convince them that Siam was both a civilized democratic nation and a valuable ally. State banquets were one way to demonstrate the civilized status of the country (cf. Turton, 1997). The state banquets of the 1860s for British diplomats intended to demonstrate that the country was in no need of imperial guidance. Western food items and meal format emulated the imperial grandeur of Victorian England. The guests were no doubt impressed with Siam's knowledge of European cuisine and etiquette. For a variety of reasons, Siam remained free of colonial control.

The Chakri dynasty's royal style of 'old Siam' is reflected in the texts and films associated with Anna Leonowens and *The King and I* (Landon, 1943; Leonowens, 1870, 1873). The depiction of the state banquet in the films was an amalgamation of many state banquets held in the 1860s

and was never a part of Anna's original observations in her monographs (cf. Van Esterik, 2006). King Mongkut was very familiar with western food and meal format, since he sent his diplomats to England in 1857 with instructions to pay particular attention to the standards of the Victorian court. But his daily meals consisted of a simple bowl of rice (eaten with gold chopsticks). He learned abstinence and ascetic habits in the decades he served as a monk in the royal temple. The insulting portrayal of the king unable to use fork and spoon, and resorting to chopsticks was one reason the books and films were banned in Thailand.

Thai noodles (1940)

The absolute monarchy ended in the 1930s with the creation of a constitutional monarchy with the king granted only limited powers over the Kingdom of Thailand. The name was changed from Siam to Thailand (land of the free) in 1939. One of the coup members, Phibun Songkhram, became Prime Minister for the first time in 1938. In his efforts to promote Thai culture, he took a very ordinary noodle recipe created in his household and standardized it in a form that is now called *pat thai*. This dish was one of many noodle dishes he promoted as part of an ideal Thai lunch. The original *pat thai* was developed as a way to improve Thai diets by increasing the protein content in dishes, while at the same time, creating a national dish of Thai noodles to contrast with Chinese noodles. While *pat thai* is often the only fried noodle dish served in North American restaurants, it is only one of many noodle creations offered in the food courts of Bangkok. Often the best *pat thai* is made by street vendors located in the shade of Thai temple compounds. Although Phibun tried to exert state power to alter Thai diets, his pronouncements and efforts to standardize recipes had very little effect on Thai cuisine in the country; it did, however have a lasting impact on overseas Thai menus.

American military presence (1964–1975)

Colonialism did not end with the independence of colonized states like Malaysia, Burma, Cambodia or Indonesia. A term like neo-colonialism might be appropriate to use, even for a crypto-colonized state such as Thailand. In the 60s and 70s, the fight against communism brought greater American presence into Thailand. Once again, skilled diplomacy on the part of the Thai state was credited with preventing Thailand from becoming another domino in the communist sweep across Southeast Asia.

How did the American presence in Thailand affect Thai cuisine? Thai classical dinners and dance-shows emerged in the sixties as popular venues for entertaining military elite and wealthy tourists. They provided a standardized set of dishes adjusted to appeal to western tourist tastes. The dishes served included *mee glop* (coated fried noodles), mild curries, and dishes that required extra labour and elegant presentation. Appetizers were served with drinks before the meal. The exotic settings with bronze cutlery and

pedestalled ceramic serving dishes were reminiscent of the sets from the banquet scene of *The King and I*, gilded exotic traces of 'old Siam'. These luxury event venues, often in expensive hotels, contrasted with other venues popular with American soldiers. The cheap hotels featuring crude sex shows served western food like hamburgers and hot dogs geared to US army furlough (R&R) tastes. Much of the food served in these places had its origin in the American army PX (Post Exchange). Around this time, Thailand's economic plans included the development of the tourist industry. The invention of tourist food included the use of American PX items such as frozen mixed vegetables, spam and sausages to create dishes like American fried rice, made with salt instead of fish sauce, and parsley instead of fresh coriander.

In the fifties and sixties, milk was scarce in Thailand, available in powdered form from New Zealand or Australia. Westerners had to buy expensive canned butter and cheese to spread on Chinese bread. Dairy foods were unappealing to the Thai public. By the eighties, dairy products were available in every market and children received cartons of milk in school. In the late sixties, a Wisconsin dairy cooperative called Foremost became the contract provider for US air bases in Thailand throughout the Vietnam War. They supplied recombined milk products for the American forces in the country and in the firebases in Vietnam. A veteran recalled that the milk was stored in gasoline powered coolers: 'it smelled and tasted like gasoline [...] didn't matter, we drank it anyway on the rare occasions when we were back at base camp' (<https://thaivisa.com/forum/topic/835245-foremost-milk-and-dairy/?do=findComment&comment=9548251>). The name, Foremost, and milk products generally became popular in the country. Foremost, owned by FrieslandCampira, received the strongest brand in Thailand award in 2016.

In the top-down effort to modify Thai food to appeal to western tourists, the sour/bitter taste was the first to disappear, as well as pungently fermented fish products. But for Thais, there remained a consistency of meal format and taste preferences, combined with a selective integration of new vegetables into established dishes. Food democracy reigned in the country, with poor and wealthy alike patronizing favourite food vendors on the streets of Bangkok and other towns and cities.

Exporting Thainess

Thai nationalism is nothing new; the power processes evident in the state banquets of the 1860s continue under the current power relations embedded in the processes of globalization. Neo-colonialism thrives in the neoliberal capitalist food industry. The Thai state now exerts food power through expanding into food commodity markets. Both individual food products such as corn, caffeine drinks, chicken and shrimp, as well as Thai cuisine itself have been exported around the world. Sidney Mintz (1996) argued that it is the outside meanings of food such as changes in food production that reveal structures of power.

Recall that corn was not grown commercially in Thailand until 1950. By the seventies, grilled corn became a common street food prepared much as it was in Japan (quick boil, then grilled with soy sauce and sugar). It was a snack food to eat for fun (*gin len*) and it was better integrated into animal feeds as fodder than cuisine. In 2017, vacuum sealed individual ready-to-eat cobs of corn from Thailand were sold in dollar stores in Canada.

Red bull (*krating daeng*), was one of the many caffeinated energy drinks used by Thai workers, particularly long-distance truck drivers. Founded in 1976 in Thailand, the company expanded its market by sponsoring Thai boxing matches. The drink was discovered by an Austrian in 1987, who then bought 50% of the Thai company and promoted the product in Europe and North America, using the English translation, red bull. Red bull was promoted as the ideal beverage when driving long distances, studying, or exerting oneself at work. White models marketed the drink for extreme sports and the company sponsored musical events and leisure activities requiring endurance. Today, *krating daeng* represents the lower end of the drink spectrum, while red bull is promoted as an upscale, more expensive yuppie drink; it is even used as a cocktail ingredient. The recipe for both products includes caffeine, taurine, B vitamins, sucrose and glucose, and alpine water.

The Thai government's promotion of food commodities such as corn, shrimp or chicken with no necessary connection to Thai cuisine in the global market does not mean that it has abandoned the promotion of Thai cuisine *per se*. To the contrary, Thai Agri Foods market curry pastes and frozen prepackaged traditional Thai foods in seventy countries, including the popular *Aroy-D* brand of prepared red and green curry pastes. Another popular prepackaged food company, *Mae ploy* sells sauces and curry pastes in supermarkets worldwide, and online through amazon.com

The marketing of royal Thai cuisine which began with the classical Thai dinners of the sixties continues with the marketing of prepackaged gourmet foods in Thai supermarkets and overseas. The 'nine auspicious Thai desserts' used to be made by the many skilled wives and women of the court of the Chakri kings (particularly Rama II, III and VI) and consumed only within the palace. Now it is possible to purchase even the most elaborate desserts in supermarkets. An interesting promotional strategy includes selling prepackaged ingredients for Thai dishes in boxes in the King Power Duty Free shops in Bangkok airport. While tourists pick up the boxes to make a complete Thai meal at home, Thai travellers pick up ingredients that remain hard to obtain overseas such as fermented fish paste (*kapi*), dried powdered shrimp (*kung hang*), tamarind candy and preserved durian. Asian tourists prefer Thai sauces made by *Thai House* and *Thai Kitchen*. This branding of elite Thai culinary culture may result in the devaluing of the diacritical significance of specific items. In the past, ordinary people would not have access to

these desserts because they lacked the skills and resources to produce them. In Siam, sumptuary laws regulated the material objects associated with meals and the dress of the eaters, but not the tastes, recipes and food items themselves (cf. Van Esterik 1980).

Sriracha sauce, a chili-garlic sauce invented and produced in the town of Sri Racha in Chonburi province in the 1930s, was served as a dipping sauce with fish or chicken. A Vietnamese version has been produced by Huy Fong foods in California since 1980, and has spread more widely than the Thai product in the North American market. It has shifted from a dipping sauce in Thailand to an ingredient in western recipes.

Clearly the Thai state didn't always get it right. They missed the opportunity to market sriracha sauce globally, and to promote red bull as a specialty drink, two products that have moved around the world. They glorified and packaged royal desserts instead of street foods as iconic Thai foods. Into this vacuum, local companies like Loblaw's in Canada have appropriated travellers' taste memories in the development of sauces. President's Choice sauces include memories of Thailand. These products depend on tourists' experiences in exotic locales by providing orientalist short cuts for their homemade meals.

Colonial consciousness

Many Euro-Americans consume direct remnants of historical colonialism in the material form of curry powders, ketchup, and Peek Frean empire cookies. Our current food practices are so deeply neo-colonial that we hardly think about consumption in those terms: it is just how we feed our families. But colonialism is more insidious than the appropriation of sauces.

Colonial consciousness or culinary colonialism thrives in the attitude that we have a right to the food of the other, and not just any food, but the most authentic and rare food of the other, including food that was prepared for royalty. We exercise this right to increase our food diversity, to stretch our taste palates. Foodies eat (and photograph) exotic yuppie chow (cf. Guthman 2003) to impress others, and they feed it to others to impress them as well. Culinary tourists and food adventurers seek out exotic foods; prepackaged gourmet sauces make the process more convenient when they return home.

Exporting Thainess includes the expansion of overseas Thai restaurants. Thai restaurants abroad often reproduce the royal style decor of 'old Siam' for customers. From the desire to appear *siwilai* (civilized) in the 1800s to the staged authenticity of overseas Thai restaurants, Thai meals provide occasions for both healthy and pleasurable eating. Most restaurants adapt their menus to Euro-American serving styles, meal formats and the presumed taste preferences of their customers. The popularity of Thai restaurants is not directly linked to immigration, except in the case of cities like Los Angeles where 170 000 Thais —

half of whom were war brides of the US military — immigrated by 1975 (Padoongpatt, 2017). Unlike other popular ethnic foods, Thai food does not link to immigrant identity formation.

The Thai state promotes and enhances the image of the nation through food. In 2003, government ministries put policies in place in to promote Thailand to be the Kitchen of the World in order to increase the number of authentic Thai restaurants abroad and to promote tourism and food exports. The Export-Import Bank of Thailand approved loans to Thai entrepreneurs who wanted to open or expand restaurants overseas. The promotion of Thai food abroad does not change Thai food in Thailand. Overseas, the meal format and taste changes, while the food items are fewer in number and the recipes become fixed. In Thailand, the format of meals and the taste combinations remain constant while the food items and recipes constantly change.

Thai Delicious, a project of the Ministry of Science and Technology, began developing standards in 2012 for measuring the authenticity of Thai recipes. This was done in order to confirm that ready-to-eat ‘authentic’ Thai foods based on ‘authentic’ Thai recipes for export overseas taste ‘authentic’. The Ministry has posted eleven recipes for popular dishes. The ministry developed the e-delicious machine to measure taste and smell and rate the deliciousness and authenticity of the Thai dishes, measured against the opinion of tasters (university students). The best tasting, by majority vote, was programmed in to the machine in order to determine to what extent a dish conformed to the arbitrary standard of a typical green curry, for example. The project was criticized for its approach to taste measurement. The more questionable underlying assumption was the idea that Thai food recipes can and should be standardized.

No doubt the Thai government feared that new fast food restaurants that claim to be Thai would devalue and debase the state-sponsored authentic Thai restaurants. These government initiatives are designed to differentiate authentic Thai restaurants from the quick service franchises such as Thai Express in Canada, ‘a new take on Thai food combining traditional Thai cuisine with new world design and flavours’. It advertises the spiciness of their dishes using photographs of four Thai women under a sign ‘How do you like it? mild, medium, spicy or very spicy’ (www.Thaiexpress.com), harkening back to the 1960s’ flaunting of sexy Thai girls and women in Bangkok and the back streets of towns near army bases. The restaurant chain joins other quick service multicultural restaurants in the food courts of Canadian shopping malls.

Conclusion

Thai cuisine is embedded in a culturally specific set of power relations. As in other food regimes, power is exerted directly through the political economy of food, recognized through food prices, the quality of rice, and export crops. This paper provided a few examples of how state power is

also mobilized through food in a form of culinary colonialism. From the state banquets organized by Siamese kings in the 1860s, and through Phibun’s attempt to modernize Thai noodle lunches through a manipulation of anti-Chinese sentiment, to the Classical Thai tourist dinners; From American fried rice for tourist consumption, to the promotion of carefully monitored Thai restaurants in North America and Europe, the Thai state uses food to control the national image of the country. Royal style cuisine as developed under the kings of the Chakri dynasty has become the basis for an invented national cuisine that bypasses much of the ethnic diversity in regional foods.

The Thai food system is particularly well-suited for this work. But why should food be used as a means to exercise power? A few theoretical speculations follow from the observations presented above. First, the Thai food system successfully negotiates the tensions between binaries — power and meaning, hierarchy and commensality, individual consumption and shared sociality, pleasurable taste and health benefits, and homemade and commercially made. For example, women who make curries at home, and sell them on the street to ‘plastic bag housewives’ who collect these homemade dishes sold in plastic bags on their way home from work. Nutritionism generally removes pleasure from eating and disguises the political exercise of commensal power. In spite of Phibun’s efforts to make *pat thai* a more nutritious patriotic noodle dish, it was the pleasure of combining peanuts, egg, bean sprouts, green onions and chilies that appealed, not the protein boost. While the state extols the healthfulness of Thai food and herbal mixtures (cf. Van Esterik, 1988), people eat it because it pleases the palate.

In the Thai case, we see the power of food to both represent and resist state power. Biopower through social exchange is always negotiated, resisted, manipulated and subverted. Much of postmodern theory culturalizes the body as text. But with food, the root of power is corporeal not textual. Meanings around food are pretextual, corporeal, and lodged in our bodies. That is one reason why food remains such a powerful and effective communicator.

Food and eating in Thailand creates unique social debts in the form of complex reciprocal relations. Eating together is always political; but it is not only the state banquets where political commensality can be seen. The personal politics of eating together is a complex dance between hierarchy and nurture. Friends (*phi nong kan*) eating together always know who is older (*phi*) and who is younger (*nong*), one sponsors, the other is sponsored. This intricate dance operates in street noodle shops as well as state dinners (cf. Van Esterik, 1996).

If the recent royal cremation is any example, Thailand will always win the culture wars. The public face, the aesthetically appealing surface is always available to scrutiny and carefully managed to appeal to outsiders; insiders are aware and complicit in maintaining these surfaces. The Thai state always was and remains extremely

conscious of what others think of the nation. No colonial experiences have convinced the Thai that other countries, or other cuisines are 'better' than theirs.

About the author

Penny Van Esterik is Professor Emerita of Anthropology, recently retired from York University, Toronto, where she taught nutritional anthropology, advocacy anthropology and feminist theory. Her fieldwork was primarily in Southeast Asia (Thailand and Lao PDR). She is a founding member of WABA (World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action) and has developed advocacy materials for them on breastfeeding and women's work, environmental contaminants and infant feeding, and breastfeeding as infant food security. Her books include *From Virtue to Vice: Negotiating Anorexia, The Dance of Nurture: Negotiating Infant Feeding* (both with Richard O'Connor), *Beyond the Breast-Bottle Controversy. Materializing Thailand, Taking Refuge: Lao Buddhists in North America, Food Culture in Southeast Asia, and Food and Culture, a reader* (edited with Carole Counihan).

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