
Muay Thai as Soft Power: Diplomacy A Sport Towards Olympic Recognition

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes how Thailand uses Muay Thai as a soft power tool in sports diplomacy, specifically in its efforts to secure Muay Thai's official Olympic status. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study examines the strategies and policies implemented by state and non-state actors to promote Muay Thai globally. Joseph Nye's soft power theoretical framework and the concept of sports diplomacy provide a foundation for understanding how local culture can be used to enhance a country's international image and influence. The findings show that Thailand actively uses Muay Thai not only as a national cultural heritage but also as a diplomatic instrument through international training, global competitions, and collaborations with world sports organizations. These efforts strengthen Thailand's position on the international stage and support its aspirations to include Muay Thai in the Olympic Games. From this, it can answer the question: how does Thailand use Muay Thai as a soft power tool in sports diplomacy to encourage its recognition as an Olympic sport?

KEYWORDS: Muay Thai, Olympic, Diplomacy, Sport, Soft Power

I. INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, countries no longer rely solely on military and economic power to project their influence, but also use cultural and sporting approaches as diplomatic instruments. Sports diplomacy, as part of soft power, has become a strategic tool for many countries to enhance their image, strengthen bilateral relations, and promote national values on the global stage. Sports such as soccer, the Olympics, and martial arts have served as a means to build national identity while expanding cultural influence (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). The United States is a clear example of democracy and freedom. In today's era of globalization, countries increasingly rely not only on military and economic power to project their influence but also on cultural and sporting approaches as diplomatic tools. Sports diplomacy, a part of soft power, has become a strategic means for many nations to enhance their image, strengthen bilateral relationships, and promote national values on the global stage. Sports such as soccer, the Olympics, and martial arts serve to build national identity while expanding cultural influence (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

The United States exemplifies how democracy and freedom can be showcased through athletic exchanges and international tournaments like the Olympics. Similarly, China systematically employs major sporting events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, to highlight its technological advancements and political stability. In contrast, Qatar is leveraging the 2022 FIFA World Cup to expand its geopolitical influence through infrastructure investments and by promoting a narrative of cultural tolerance: athletic exchanges and international tournaments like the Olympics. Besides the United States, China also systematically uses major sporting events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics, to showcase its technological advancement and political stability. Meanwhile, Qatar is using the 2022 FIFA World Cup as a momentum to expand its geopolitical influence through infrastructure investment and a narrative of cultural tolerance. Countries such as Japan and South Korea also use sporting events to restore their image after historical conflicts or disasters, while simultaneously promoting economic growth through tourism and trade. Thus, sports diplomacy not only strengthens national identity but also serves as a strategic tool in global politics.

Thailand, as one of the Southeast Asian countries active in cultural diplomacy, has utilized its traditional martial art, Muay Thai, as a key element of its soft power. Through international promotion of Muay Thai, Thailand not only preserves its cultural heritage but also strengthens its position as a regional cultural hub. The Thai government has also integrated Muay Thai into its foreign policy, collaborating with various global sports organizations to ensure the martial art's widespread recognition. The Thai government has adopted a multidimensional approach to promoting Muay Thai as part of cultural diplomacy. One key strategy is cultural diplomacy, in which Muay Thai is positioned as a symbol of Thailand's national identity. The Thai Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports actively support the organization of international tournaments, such as the King's Cup and Queen's Cup, which attract participants from various countries (Chaipraditkul, 2021).

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The Thai government is also working with global sports organizations to gain formal recognition for Muay Thai. In 2021, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) granted provisional recognition to IFMA, opening the door for Muay Thai to one day be included in the Olympic Games (IOC, 2021). This move not only increased Muay Thai's prestige but also strengthened Thailand's position as a global leader in martial arts. Subsequently, the Thai government collaborated with the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations (IFMA) and other international organizations to secure Muay Thai's recognition as an Olympic sport. Non-state actors, primarily mass media and entertainment, also play a significant role in popularizing Muay Thai. Thai action films, such as *Ong-Bak* (2003) starring Tony Jaa, have introduced Muay Thai to a global audience. Furthermore, digital platforms such as YouTube and Instagram are used to disseminate tutorials, matches, and documentaries about Muay Thai, expanding its reach among young people worldwide.

This study will evaluate the Thai government's policy of promoting Muay Thai as part of its national soft power strategy. This analysis will consider sports policy, funding, and the role of institutions such as the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations (IFMA) and the National Olympic Committee of Thailand (NOCT) in strengthening Muay Thai's global legitimacy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has extensively promoted not only Muay Thai but also renowned Muay Thai boxers as sports ambassadors for its cultural diplomacy policy, as part of transformational diplomacy in the new century, in which foreign ministries are tasked with increasingly nuanced roles (Copeland, 2009, p. 102).

Based on the background above, this research question is: How does Thailand use Muay Thai as an international sports diplomacy strategy? This question encompasses two important elements: first, the strategic rationale behind Thailand's adoption of Muay Thai as a sports diplomacy tool (soft power). Second, the methods or mechanisms Thailand uses to use Muay Thai as a diplomatic tool, encompassing policies, programs, and the actors involved.

In recent years, the study of Thailand's cultural diplomacy and soft power has attracted scholarly attention, as the Thai government seeks to leverage its cultural influence to influence the world. Jones and Theerawong (2021) explore how Thailand supports Muay Thai's recognition as an Olympic sport as a form of cultural diplomacy. This study emphasizes how the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Muay Thai athletes contribute to enhancing the country's soft power through sports diplomacy. Jones and Theerawong found that Muay Thai has become a culturally attractive sport for foreigners, and overseas Muay Thai events are used to enhance Thailand's reputation. In public diplomacy, government support for promoting Muay Thai on the international stage through embassies and international cooperation reflects Thailand's soft power strategy. This article demonstrates that the Thai government has explicitly used Muay Thai as a cultural diplomacy tool, especially after 2015, when the Olympic campaign intensified.

Thai Jo (2024) examines Thailand's soft power policy within the framework of the creative economy. This study discusses how the Thai government, particularly from the era of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha (2014-2022) to the new administration of Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin (2023-present), has made soft power a national agenda. Soft power is seen as a mechanism for increasing bargaining power and achieving economic goals at the international level. Government policy emphasizes the utilization of widely popular cultural resources, with a focus on the categories known as the "5Fs"—food, fashion, film, fighting, and festivals. Interestingly, the term "fight" in the 5Fs refers to Muay Thai as a symbol of competitive culture.

The findings of the studies above align with discussions regarding the emergence of new actors in sports diplomacy, reinforcing the shift from state-centric diplomacy to multi-stakeholder diplomacy (Beacom, 2012). This model places states, international organizations, sports federations, the media, and the private sector on equal footing in shaping international relations. According to Hocking (in Beacom, 2012), this diplomatic process reflects the transcendent nature of diplomatic practice itself, which constantly adapts to changing global structures. Therefore, sport is viewed not merely as a social or cultural activity but also as a primary medium for building the legitimacy, reputation, and soft power of states in the modern world.

Furthermore, within the analytical framework, sports diplomacy is a new academic field of study that has emerged over the past decade. Sports diplomacy offers core characteristics of diplomacy (representation, negotiation, and communication) within a conceptual understanding of sport, which, first and foremost, guides practitioners' skills in connecting with and learning from diverse parts of the sporting landscape. Second, it helps policymakers, practitioners, and academics engage in critical reflection to improve their practices in these overlapping and connected spaces (Rofe, 2019).

As an instrument of diplomacy, sport can strengthen relations and socio-cultural connections between countries. Sport is a universal language that can transcend ethnic, religious, and political differences, thus helping people communicate across cultures. Sports diplomacy aligns with Nye's (2004) understanding of soft power, which is the power of a country to influence other countries through attractive culture, values, and policies. Furthermore, soft power aims to persuade rather than coerce. Nye also argues that the three primary sources of soft power are culture, political values, and foreign policy. He also notes that popular sport can play a significant role in communicating a country's values (Nye, 2004, p. 47). Thus, the term soft power refers to the ability to shape the preferences and behavior of other countries through attractiveness, rather than financial payments or military force.

Furthermore, the concept of soft power has sparked considerable debate among academics and policymakers regarding its efficacy and limitations in shaping international relations. Critics argue that soft power is too intangible to measure or that its impact is often overshadowed by complex power strategies such as economic sanctions or military force. Furthermore, others argue that

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soft power's reliance on cultural appeal and ideological persuasion makes it vulnerable to misinterpretation or rejection, especially in contexts where values clash. However, proponents, drawing on the foundational work of Joseph Nye, emphasize its long-term influence in cultivating goodwill and shaping global perceptions without coercion. This debate underscores the need to examine how soft power operates in practice, particularly through platforms such as sports that transcend political boundaries to project a nation's values and identity.

An analytical framework that frames cultural diplomacy within soft power provides a strong conceptual basis for understanding how a country like Thailand articulates its culture in its foreign policy. Muay Thai, as a cultural product and diplomatic tool, demonstrates that power does not always come from weapons or money, but from stories, symbols, and values accepted by the world.

II. METHOD

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to analyze how Thailand uses Muay Thai as a tool of soft power and sports diplomacy. The data used in this study consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through in-depth interviews with the director of TAT Jakarta. In addition, direct observations of international Muay Thai tournaments and various promotional events were conducted to understand how the sport is presented on the global stage.

Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from various sources, including Thai government policy documents on soft power strategies and sports diplomacy, as well as journal articles, books, and academic reports on the development of Muay Thai as an international sport. Furthermore, news and publications from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), IFMA, and sports media were also crucial in analyzing the dynamics of Muay Thai's inclusion in the Olympics.

This study employed three primary methods for data collection. A library study was conducted by analyzing academic literature and policy documents related to Thailand's soft power and sports diplomacy. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives of key actors on the strategies and challenges of using Muay Thai as soft power in Thailand's sports diplomacy. Furthermore, a document analysis was conducted to examine the policies and strategies implemented by the Thai government and related organizations to promote Muay Thai globally.

The data obtained were analyzed in three stages (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction involved selecting and filtering relevant information from various sources to focus the research. Data presentation was then carried out by organizing the findings into tables, narratives, or diagrams to facilitate understanding of the patterns and relationships emerging in the study. Finally, conclusions were drawn by analyzing how Muay Thai is used as soft power in Thailand's sports diplomacy.

III. MAIN DISCUSSION

A. *Muay Thai Culture as an International Attraction*

Muay Thai has become one of the most globally recognized elements of Thai culture, fulfilling Joseph Nye's definition of culture as a source of soft power. The sport not only offers effective self-defense techniques but also embodies profound philosophical values through rituals such as Wai Khru (respect for the teacher) and Ram Muay (traditional dance). These cultural elements create a unique appeal that distinguishes Muay Thai from other martial arts. It originated in the late 20th century and became widely known abroad in the early 21st century through various media outlets. Both in Thailand and abroad, Muay Thai has been promoted in popular culture, such as movies and video games. It has become an entertaining sport that foreigners should experience at least once in their lives. Besides witnessing the art of boxing, Muay Thai now integrates punches with kicks.

Furthermore, Muay Thai's development on the international stage has been driven by its ability to adapt to global popular culture. Many elements of Muay Thai have been adopted in Hollywood films and mixed martial arts (MMA) performances, introducing it to a broader audience. These adaptations, while not diminishing its traditional values, have instead enriched the cross-cultural understanding of the Thai martial art. However, ongoing efforts are needed to maintain its authenticity amidst globalization.

The Thai government recognizes the importance of preserving the authentic cultural aspects of Muay Thai while encouraging its international expansion. Various cultural preservation programs have been launched, including documenting the history of Muay Thai and training young Thais. The challenge ahead is to balance commercialization and preservation, ensuring that Muay Thai remains an authentic ambassador of Thai culture to the world. Therefore, one of Thailand's key strategies is to include Muay Thai as an official Olympic sport, thereby strengthening its position as a cultural authority. As noted by Abdi et al., sport can be a credible source of soft power in three ways: hosting prestigious events, the presence of accomplished athletes, and engaging sports products. Thailand has leveraged these three elements by sending Muay Thai athletes as cultural ambassadors, organizing international roadshows, and producing media content that encourages public engagement. Thus, Muay Thai has become not only a diplomatic tool but also a strategic asset in building Thailand's image on the global stage.

B. *Sports Diplomacy in the Context of Muay Thai*

Muay Thai has become a crucial instrument in Thailand's cultural diplomacy, serving as a soft power tool to shape positive perceptions and enhance the country's international appeal. According to Joseph Nye, soft power relies on three key variables:

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culture, political values, and foreign policy, with sport playing a key role in shaping a country's image. As part of its public diplomacy strategy, Muay Thai is promoted not only as a traditional martial art but also as a symbol of Thailand's vibrant and compelling identity. By leveraging its intrinsic appeal, Thailand has successfully internalized its cultural values in the global community, thereby creating a preference for and interest in the country. Furthermore, sports diplomacy has become a key operational mechanism in promoting Muay Thai as Thailand's soft power. As host of the IFMA World Championships since 1995, Thailand has successfully increased participation from 42 countries (2010) to 110 countries (2023).

Furthermore, Muay Thai reached a historic milestone at the 2023 European Games in Poland, making its debut as an official medal sport. This participation marked Muay Thai's growing international recognition, having previously been recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) through IFMA's membership. Eighty athletes from 23 countries participated in the competition, which featured 10 weight classes—five for men and five for women—demonstrating IFMA's commitment to inclusivity and gender equality. The matches, held at the Mysłenice Arena, drew an overwhelming response from the crowd. The crowd packed the arena from the start, reflecting the European community's enthusiasm for the sport. Not only was the sporting aspect on display, but also elements of traditional Thai culture. Each match opened with the Wai Kru ritual, a symbol of respect and heritage, accompanied by traditional music from a Pi Muay band brought in from Thailand, dressed in traditional costumes.

In this regard, the 2023 European Games is a crucial opportunity to affirm Thailand's cultural identity on the global sporting stage. By showcasing cultural elements alongside international competition, Muay Thai is seen not only as a martial art but also as a symbol of a rich cultural heritage with universal value. This demonstrates Muay Thai's ability to adapt to a multinational framework without losing its traditional roots. Furthermore, Muay Thai competitions at the European Games receive extensive coverage through the official European Games TV broadcast, further enhancing the sport's global visibility and providing opportunities to expand its fan base and introduce Thai cultural values to an international audience. The European Olympic Committee (EOC) also praised the professional organization of Muay Thai and the competitive atmosphere created during the games.

Overall, Muay Thai's debut at the 2023 European Games represents a significant step forward in the sport's journey toward greater international recognition. Through a combination of competitive aspects, gender equality, and cultural preservation, Muay Thai has successfully demonstrated itself as a modern sport with strong traditional roots. This success strengthens its position not only as a martial art but also as an instrument of cultural diplomacy and soft power for Thailand at the global level (IFMA). The role of the private sector in Muay Thai sports diplomacy is also increasingly important. Many Thai companies sponsor Muay Thai athletes and championships abroad as part of their global marketing strategy.

This synergy between the government and the private sector creates a multiplier effect in promoting Muay Thai and other Thai products. Going forward, the main challenge is to improve the quality of international Muay Thai competitions to match those of other Olympic sports. Thailand needs to invest more in developing athletes, referees, and a competition system that meets international standards. Thus, Muay Thai will not only become a tool for cultural diplomacy, but also a prestigious sport with global recognition. Therefore, the role of athletes and public figures in Muay Thai diplomacy should not be overlooked. As Cull points out, individuals play a crucial role in public diplomacy, and Muay Thai athletes serve as brand ambassadors, linking Thailand's image to positive perceptions among the global community. Pigman and Dubinsky emphasize that the association between athletes and their home country can strengthen national identity while enhancing soft power competitiveness. Thailand has capitalized on this by promoting renowned fighters as the face of its culture, thus reinforcing the narrative that Muay Thai is a unique heritage worthy of international recognition.

Overall, Muay Thai diplomacy is a successful example of how sports can be an effective soft power tool. Through a combination of cultural promotion, media engagement, and nation-branding strategies, Thailand not only promotes its martial arts but also builds emotional connections with the global community. This success demonstrates that sports diplomacy is not merely about cultural exchange but also about shaping long-term preferences that enhance a country's image and national interests.

C. Thai Government's Political Efforts and Public Relations

The Thai government has undertaken various political efforts to promote Muay Thai internationally, reflecting its political values as a source of soft power. The establishment of the National Soft Power Strategy Committee in 2023 with a budget of 5.1 billion baht demonstrates a serious commitment to coordinating cultural promotion, including Muay Thai, involving 13 different ministries. These policies demonstrate that the Thai government is pursuing global recognition of Muay Thai not only as a sport, but as a strategic cultural force (soft power). The steps have been planned, starting from strengthening domestic capacity, expanding international networks, and utilizing Muay Thai as a bridge for culture and diplomacy. The Thai government has also consistently made Muay Thai a key instrument in its soft power strategy. In 2016, the Thai Cabinet approved a budget of 275 million baht for the Muay Thai Soft Power program. This budget is used to develop a training curriculum, train referees and coaches, and establish a certification center and monitor the quality of Muay Thai coaches at home and abroad. The aim is to elevate Muay Thai from a traditional martial art to a global sport (Thairath).

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In addition, the government is also providing special visa relaxation for tourists learning Muay Thai. To boost sports tourism, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin supports granting 90-day special visas (down from the usual 60 days) for tourists visiting to learn Muay Thai, as well as for other cultural experiences such as Thai dance and cuisine. This policy is intended to strengthen cultural ties while boosting the local economy. (Thairath). This aligns with the Minister of Tourism and Sports' plan. On January 22, 2024, in an interview with Minister of Tourism and Sports Sutadawan Hongsupaticosol and Governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) Thapanee Kiatphaibul, the publication emphasized the importance of soft power as a new driver of the country's economy. The two figures stated that the development of 11 areas of soft power, including culture, sports, music, culinary arts, and tourism, is highly strategic and directly contributes to Thailand's tourism sector. They emphasized that these various elements of soft power not only create a positive image but also strengthen the domestic creative economy sector (Thairath).

International standardization efforts have become a significant focus of the Thai government in recent years. By collaborating with international federations, Thailand is developing a globally accepted Muay Thai curriculum. This step is crucial to ensure that Muay Thai teaching and training across various countries remain consistent with Thailand's original standards. Standardization is also a crucial requirement for Muay Thai's inclusion in the Olympics.

However, internal political challenges often hamper these efforts. Differing views among various interest groups in Thailand regarding the future of Muay Thai sometimes create inconsistent policies. The government needs to establish a more effective coordination mechanism among stakeholders, including traditional trainers, professional athletes, and academics, to ensure the sustainable development of Muay Thai. However, the government is strengthening the capacity and certification of Muay Thai teachers by establishing Muay Thai trainer certification centers to facilitate training and quality standard exams. Starting in April, eight certified instructors were sent abroad to countries such as Saudi Arabia to teach Muay Thai professionally. This creates opportunities for increased income (80,000–120,000 baht per month) for trainers and expands their soft power network through talent exchange (Thairath).

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Furthermore, Public Relations (PR) plays a crucial role through collaboration with local and international media outlets. The Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs has successfully raised global awareness of Muay Thai and spread positive messages about the event. Media serves as a powerful tool to reach a wider audience, transcending physical limitations such as venue capacity or instructor availability. A successful example is the collaboration with LRT (Lithuanian National Radio and Television), where Muay Thai and Thai culture were featured in popular programs, creating a deep sense of "Thainess" in the minds of Lithuanian audiences, a significant achievement considering the lack of direct interaction between Lithuanian and Thai communities. (MFA).

In addition to local media, digital content is an effective way to promote this project. A semi-documentary video produced by The Cloud, for example, attracted hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and Facebook, proving that engaging and informative content can spark global interest in Muay Thai. Good PR not only introduces beginners to this martial art but also strengthens Thai pride. Seeing the government's efforts to promote Muay Thai internationally, Thais are increasingly motivated to support and preserve their cultural heritage.

The success of this project's PR strategy demonstrates that cultural diplomacy relies not only on physical activities like demonstrations and workshops, but also on how the message is disseminated. The combination of mainstream media coverage and creative digital content keeps Muay Thai relevant and appealing to a wide range of audiences. Moving forward, strengthening collaboration with media outlets, both traditional and digital, will remain key to expanding Thailand's cultural influence and enhancing the country's soft power globally (MFA).

D. Thai Foreign Policy

Thailand's foreign policy in promoting Muay Thai demonstrates the implementation of Nye's three sources of soft power. Through public diplomacy, Thailand has opened Thai Cultural Centers in 48 countries with Muay Thai as the primary curriculum, while simultaneously promoting UNESCO recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

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Not only has Muay Thai become an effective cultural diplomacy tool for Thailand, but it has also been promoted globally through the Muay Thai Roadshow project, launched by the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2012. This project aims to enhance cultural appreciation of Muay Thai while supporting diplomatic missions of cultural relations and development. Through demonstrations and workshops across continents, Thailand not only introduces its traditional martial art but also corrects misperceptions about Muay Thai internationally. Engaging, authentic demonstrations captivate audiences, while workshops provide hands-on experience for participants at all levels, from beginners to professionals.

One of the project's successes lies in its inclusive and adaptive approach. Muay Thai is taught to diverse groups, including athletes, military personnel, people with disabilities, and at-risk children, demonstrating its versatility as a means of selfdevelopment and therapy. Collaborations with local institutions, such as sports universities and non-profit organizations, expand Muay Thai's social impact while building a global network. In countries with cultural barriers, such as Muslim countries, the program is adapted to local norms, for example, by providing female coaches for female participants.

The Muay Thai Roadshow project also helps strengthen Thailand's bilateral relations with other countries. Activities such as special workshops for elites, including the Jordanian royal family, demonstrate how Muay Thai can be a tool for high-level diplomacy. Furthermore, the donation of equipment and training to marginalized communities, such as in Brazil and Kenya, reflects Thailand's commitment to leveraging culture for global social development. (MFA). Furthermore, on February 22-23, 2023, the Royal Thai Embassy in Cairo participated in the Sakia Exhibition for Cultural Services (SECS) 2023 at the El Culturewheel Cultural Center. At the Thailand Booth, various activities were held to promote Thai culture and tourism, such as games about Thailand, Thai food tastings, fruit carvings, and a photo booth.

Furthermore, the embassy, in collaboration with the Egyptian Muay Thai Federation, organized a Muay Thai demonstration to promote the sport in Egypt. The Thailand Booth and Muay Thai demonstration received high interest from attendees. The Thailand Tourism Authority, Middle East & North Africa, Hala Thailand, Dubai, also provided promotional materials and gifts to promote Thai tourism at this year's event.

In addition, the Minister of Tourism and Sports launched a national fighting competition to promote Muay Thai as soft power, a sporting culture, and tourism, as part of the foreign policy aimed at advancing Muay Thai. This initiative aims to boost the economy through sports policy. This professional Muay Thai competition demonstrates the integration of sports and the economy. It aims to stimulate tourism revenue, create local jobs, and promote service businesses that align with the policy framework. The government's "Sports for the Economy" campaign also uses Thai boxing to attract foreign tourists. This initiative aims to open trade and investment opportunities in border provinces such as Sa Kaeo (as reported by the government public relations department).

Finally, to promote Thailand's image through cultural identity, the Thai government uses Muay Thai as a tool to raise awareness (Nation Branding) of the "Motherland of Muay Thai," linking it with the strengths of cultural and natural tourism in Sa Kaeo Province. This policy reflects the "Creative Diplomacy" framework, which combines cultural heritage with tourism innovation to create sustainable economic and social value. Therefore, the "Homeland Battle" activity in Sa Kaeo Province is a clear example of Thailand's foreign policy, which uses Muay Thai as soft power to exert cultural influence. It boosts the economy and enhances the country's image on the world stage through cooperation across all sectors. This aligns with the direction of the Thailand 4.0 policy, which aims to transform culture into economic and diplomatic power systematically.

III.1. The Government Utilizes the Tourism Authority of Thailand

In this research, primary data were collected through an interview with Mr. Niti Vongvichasvandi, Director of TAT Jakarta, to gain a firsthand perspective on Muay Thai's role as a soft-power instrument in Thailand. The interviewee emphasized that Muay Thai is not merely a martial art but also a medium for cultural diplomacy that can strengthen Thailand's international image.

According to him, when discussing the role of Muay Thai, the Thai government has indeed positioned the traditional sport as one of the country's primary soft-power instruments. In recent years, there has been a clear strategy to promote Muay Thai not only as a sport but also as a symbol of national culture and identity. In fact, in 2024, the government launched the Muay Thai Soft Power Project with a budget of hundreds of millions of baht to strengthen promotion, standardize certification, and organize international-scale Muay Thai competitions. The goal is clear: Thailand wants to be recognized as the world's center of Muay Thai.

Furthermore, from a tourism perspective, the Ministry of Tourism and Sports also runs programs such as the Amazing Muay Thai Experience. This program, held in various provinces, showcases traditional Muay Boran styles so tourists can learn directly from the source. Furthermore, there is the annual World Wai Kru Muay Thai Ceremony in Ayutthaya. This festival is not just a sporting attraction, but also emphasizes the cultural, spiritual, and traditional values that set Muay Thai apart from other martial arts.

Furthermore, the government is not stopping there. The Muay Thai for All program, which will begin in 60 pilot schools by 2025, gives children the opportunity to choose Muay Thai as a subject, with an official curriculum and certified instructors. This way, from an early age, they will not only be exposed to Muay Thai as a sport but also explore career opportunities in training, competitions, or related creative industries. To attract Muay Thai enthusiasts from abroad, the government offers special 90-day visas for tourists who want to train in Thailand. This visa allows them to stay longer, participate in training, or even compete professionally. This is a very strategic move because it strengthens Thailand's position as the official home of Muay Thai and a major destination for sports tourism.

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Furthermore, at the cultural diplomacy level, Thailand frequently sends trainers and holds Muay Thai performances abroad, such as in Berlin and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it could be said that Muay Thai is truly used as a bridge to strengthen international relations. Through a combination of festivals, education, tourism, and diplomacy, Thailand aims to ensure that Muay Thai is not just a sport, but also a face of Thai culture that is recognized and appreciated worldwide.

Overall, Muay Thai is a unique soft power instrument for Thailand, combining sport, art, tradition, and tourism. Through support from the government and the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Muay Thai is positioned not only as a martial art but also as a cultural asset that can enhance Thailand's global appeal. By overcoming regulatory challenges, competition, and maintaining authenticity, Muay Thai has the potential to further strengthen its role as Thailand's soft power in international diplomacy.

As a traditional sport that has become a global phenomenon, Muay Thai occupies a strategic position within the Thai Ministry of Tourism and Sports' policy framework. An interview with the director of TAT Jakarta revealed that Muay Thai is positioned not only as a sport but also as an instrument of cultural diplomacy capable of strengthening the national image on the international stage. This approach aligns with Thailand's soft power development strategy, which emphasizes the use of cultural and sporting assets to support tourism, enhance the country's appeal, and raise Muay Thai's profile at international sporting events, including the Olympics.

Based on the interviews, several key findings demonstrate how the Thai government's concrete policies and programs are geared toward establishing Muay Thai as an instrument of sports diplomacy. These findings include promotional efforts through international festivals, the integration of Muay Thai into tourism strategies, and multilateral diplomacy involving international sports organizations. The following section will detail how the Ministry of Tourism interviewees emphasized cultural, economic, and political factors in developing Muay Thai as a national soft-power platform.

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III.2. Thailand Takes Advantage of APEC

In its capacity as host of APEC 2022, Thailand used this multilateral forum not only to discuss global economic issues but also to promote its national cultural identity. One key element highlighted was Muay Thai, a traditional martial art that has become a symbol of national identity. The presence of more than 21 world economic leaders and international delegates in Bangkok made APEC a strategic platform to strengthen Thailand's image through cultural diplomacy.

As part of the official APEC Economic Leaders' Week (AELW) activities, the Thai government staged cultural performances, including a Muay Thai demonstration featuring international fighter Buakaw Banchamek. The event was positioned not simply as entertainment but as a representation of the nation's cultural heritage, embodying the values of discipline, courage, and sportsmanship. In line with that, Thailand also hosts แฟชั่นโชว์ผ้าไหมไทย (Thai Silk Fashion Show) and showcases typical Thai cuisine, thereby promoting Muay Thai within the framework of integrated cultural diplomacy.

This strategy demonstrates how Thailand articulates Muay Thai as a soft power instrument within the framework of sports diplomacy. By presenting the traditional martial art in international forums, Thailand seeks to create a positive impression, strengthen its national image, and build closeness with partner countries through cultural channels. As emphasized in a document from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, cultural promotion at APEC 2022 aims to "communicate Thai diplomacy to connect the nation with the world."

Beyond diplomacy, promoting Muay Thai at the APEC forum also has economic implications. Thailand positions Muay Thai as a key attraction in the sports tourism and creative industries sectors. Leveraging APEC's global exposure, Thailand is encouraging the development of a culture-based creative economy ecosystem, including Muay Thai training for tourists, hosting international competitions, and developing derivative products such as clothing, films, and digital media. This aligns with the APEC 2022 agenda, which emphasizes innovation-based and sustainable economic development (2022).

Therefore, the integration of Muay Thai into APEC 2022 reflects Thailand's comprehensive cultural diplomacy strategy. This traditional sport is presented not only as a cultural heritage but also as a diplomatic tool and an instrument of economic development. Through this approach, Thailand has successfully established Muay Thai as a symbol of national identity with global relevance, while simultaneously strengthening Thailand's position within the soft power-based international diplomatic architecture.

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Overall, the promotion of Muay Thai at the 2022 APEC forum demonstrated how Thailand is able to integrate its cultural heritage into modern diplomacy. Through Muay Thai demonstrations before world leaders, Thailand not only showcased its national identity but also emphasized its soft power strategy based on sports diplomacy. This served as an effective means of strengthening Thailand's positive image, expanding its international network, and supporting broader cultural diplomacy goals. Furthermore, the use of Muay Thai at APEC contributed to the tourism and creative economy sectors, making it a major attraction for global sports tourism and the entertainment industry. The integration of sports, culture, and official diplomacy also demonstrated Thailand's ability to package its national identity within an international narrative that aligns with APEC's sustainable development agenda. Ultimately, Muay Thai is not just a martial art, but a strategic diplomatic instrument that connects Thailand with the world. Through the APEC forum, Thailand has successfully positioned Muay Thai as a symbol of soft power, with long-term impacts on Thailand's image, economy, and position within the international system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study uses Joseph Nye's theoretical framework of sports diplomacy to examine Muay Thai as an instrument of Thailand's soft power, focusing on three key sources: culture, political values, and international policy. Although Muay Thai has developed into a globally recognized symbol of Thai culture with millions of practitioners worldwide, the analysis finds that its recognition as an Olympic sport remains hampered by national policy divisions, competition with other sports, and a lack of strategic coordination. Sports diplomacy, through events such as the IFMA World Championships and collaborations with non-state actors, has increased its influence. However, issues such as commercialization, which diminish the sport's authentic value, and restrictive visa policies remain. This study demonstrates the difficulty of converting cultural popularity into measurable political influence. Nye's soft power theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how Muay Thai functions as a tool of cultural diplomacy, particularly in analyzing its universal appeal and the Thai government's promotional strategies. Its primary strength lies in its ability to explain the relationship between cultural appeal and political influence. However, the theory suffers from weaknesses in measuring the concrete impact of soft power on achieving specific political goals, such as Olympic recognition. Nye's limited discussion of the role of non-state actors (private sector, athletes, and community groups) also complicates the analysis of their contributions to Muay Thai diplomacy. Furthermore, the theory fails to account for local cultural resistance to the globalization of foreign martial arts.

To address the limitations of soft power theory, further research could adopt a hybrid theoretical approach by incorporating concepts from nation branding or public diplomacy to measure the economic and political impact of Muay Thai more quantitatively. Data on the psychological impact of Muay Thai on the international community's perception of Thailand, or a comparative analysis with Japan's success in becoming an Olympic sport, could provide new insights beyond Nye's framework. Qualitative research, including in-depth interviews with traditional coaches and international athletes, helps illuminate the bottomup dynamics of sports diplomacy, which are often overlooked in state-centric analyses of soft power theory.

Furthermore, establishing international cooperation networks, including the development of training standards and a professional certification system for Muay Thai teachers, is another way for Muay Thai to maintain its authentic identity while adapting to the needs of the modern world. Finally, Muay Thai should be promoted to the "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" status under UNESCO's sustainable certification. This would serve as an international guarantee of Muay Thai's value and importance as a living culture and a shared source of pride for all Thai people.

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