In 1965 Marie Wilson published Siamese Cookery, the first Thai cookbook in the United States. As a self-described homemaker from West Los Angeles, Wilson wrote and illustrated the cookbook to encourage fellow homemakers to cook Thai food in their own kitchens. She assured readers that while “there is nothing plain about Thai cooking,” the dishes are “not difficult to prepare.”¹ Her cookbook included dozens of recipes collected over ten years of travel through Thailand. She also added a short memoir about her experiences with Thai people and culture. Her goal was simple and modest: “Thai food has found a permanent place in our home. I hope this little book will make it a happy addition to your household.”²

To understand how and why a white suburban housewife from West Los Angeles like Marie Wilson became an authority on Thai cuisine in the United States during this period requires a look into the everyday life of U.S. empire in Cold War Thailand. U.S. intervention allowed white American women to taste Thai food for the first time and then become experts in it. They used foodways to build knowledge about Thailand and Thai people and disseminated it within the formal boundaries of the United States, especially in Los Angeles. Amid the development of Thailand’s tourist industry and infrastructure after World War II, foodways emerged as the key site for constructing Thais as an exotic neocolonial subject. Yet white American women’s fascination with Thai cuisine, part of a larger appetite for “Oriental” cuisine among suburban American housewives in the 1960s, did much more than foster attitudes and feelings that justified U.S. involvement in Thailand.³ It also sustained the informal U.S. empire. These women’s so-called discovery of Thai cooking practices, their role in transforming foods from sustenance to commodities, and their standardization of recipes in cookbooks all
functioned as mechanisms of domination. Above all, U.S. neocolonialism in Thailand underpinned these intimate, complex encounters with Thai food culture and made their discoveries and representations of exotic Others possible.

The United States and Thailand enjoyed over a century of amicable relations before World War II, forging a positive, yet unequal, formal relationship primarily through commercial treaties and diplomatic, cultural, and educational exchanges. Official relations had begun with signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1833 (also known as the Roberts Treaty), the first ever agreement between the United States and an Asian nation. American missionaries served as the first U.S. diplomats in what was then called Siam, and several became traders and printers. Americans believed in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon technology, intellect, and culture as well as the economic and moral necessity of free trade. Even the most sympathetic of American officials expressed negative sentiments about the "barbaric laws and customs" and the "outlawry and demoralization prevailing" in Siam.

Of course, Siamese officials developed their own opinions about the West and Westerners based on interactions with Americans in Siam. King Mongkut of Siam and members of his royal court despised Christianity even as they accepted American missionary activity in the kingdom. They rejected Christianity as a "foolish religion" mainly because they considered it not nearly as rooted in a modern scientific, rational, and reasoned view of the world as Buddhist principles. In addition, Siamese leaders opposed the Western notion that material and moral progress were intertwined, at times openly debating with diplomats and missionaries and criticizing them in print.

In spite of these qualms, at the turn of the twentieth century Siamese leaders became more deeply committed to Anglo-Saxon ideas of progress as they fixated on becoming a "civilized" modern nation-state. They adopted modern geography and its "indispensable" new technology of mapping and map making to discursively construct Siam’s territorial boundaries, values, and practices—its "geo-body”—and made it legible as a modern nation to the Western world. In addition, officials and various groups of elite in Siam embarked on a quest for siwilai, a transliteration of the English word civilized that expressed a desire to progress along Western lines in terms of material progress, etiquette, and everything in between.

World War II both tested and strengthened U.S.-Thai relations. Shortly after bombing Pearl Harbor, on December 8, 1941, Japanese troops invaded
Thailand seeking safe passage to fight the British in Malaysia and Burma. Within a few weeks Thailand formed a military alliance with Japan. And on January 25, 1942, Thailand officially declared war on the United States and the Allied powers. Thailand was not a passive victim of Japanese coercion. Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram believed Thailand could help Japan bring an end to white Western colonialism in Asia, and to possibly create a new world in which Thais and other Asians would not be “little brown brothers.” However, Seni Pramoj, the Thai minister in Washington, D.C., refused to deliver the declaration of war to President Franklin Roosevelt because he regarded it as illegal and against the wishes of Thai people. Pramoj, along with a group of Thai students in the United States, organized an underground “Free Thai” movement. In collaboration with the American Office of Strategic Services, the movement offered voluntary military support to the Allied powers, used political propaganda and public relations campaigns to persuade fellow Thai to resist Japanese forces, and performed damage control to reestablish good relations with the United States. After Japan’s surrender on August 15, 1945, Thai officials also issued a peace proclamation stating that Thailand’s declaration of war was unconstitutional and against the interests of Thailand and Thai people. The arguments convinced U.S. officials. U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes responded, “The American government has always believed that the declaration did not represent the will of the Thai people as it was under Japanese control. . . . During the past four years we have regarded Thailand not as an enemy, but as a country to be liberated from the enemy. With that liberation now accomplished we look to the resumption by Thailand of its former place in the community of nations as a free, sovereign, and independent country.” The end of World War II marked a watershed moment for U.S.-Thai relations: the start of Thailand’s “American Era.”

**RENDERING THE THAI NEOCOLONIAL SUBJECT**

The informal postwar U.S. empire created the conditions for U.S. citizens to get to know and experience Thailand, Thai people, and Thai culture. The new *farangs*, a diverse group of Americans ranging from social scientists and military officials to exchange students and tourists, produced and circulated representations of Thailand that attempted to establish sentimental bonds between Americans and Thais. They developed knowledge of Thailand and its people through popular culture and face-to-face encounters. Members of
each *farang* category certainly had unique individual experiences and therefore interpreted Thai people and culture subjectively. Collectively, however, U.S. citizens put forth a set of overlapping and, at times, competing narratives. They familiarized other Americans with the relatively unknown U.S. client state, depicting Thailand as open and adaptable to global changes, such as the intrusion of American-style capitalism and culture, and describing Thai people as lazy yet friendly and naturally subservient to hierarchies. They saw Thai society and culture operating on a path of least resistance embodied in the *mai bpen rai* attitude, a widely used Thai expression variously meaning, “you’re welcome” and “no problem” or “do not worry, just enjoy life,” when applied to bad or unpleasant situations. These narratives justified U.S. intervention.

Immediately after World War II, U.S. businessmen and companies helped form the idea that Thais and Americans shared commonalities, giving the impression that capitalist development was in the best interest of both nations. Thailand’s American era witnessed only a modest investment of U.S. capital in mostly mining, petroleum, hotel, silk, and shipping companies. Thailand remained too remote and too risky an investment. Still, some companies and their executives sought to expand and capitalize on Thailand’s trade relations and historical pro-Western stance. Among them was Jan van Oosten of San Marino, California. As an executive for a steamship line, he traveled to Bangkok for two months in 1949. A naturalized citizen from Holland, Van Oosten saw great similarities among Americans and “Thailanders,” mainly because both championed freedom in “business and personal life” and had never been “conquered or exploited.” “The Siamese intrigue me more than any other Oriental nationality,” he observed. “They are adaptable and at the same time independent. Like Americans, they are democratic although the country is ruled by a king.” Before leaving Bangkok, van Oosten told Thai government officials that he wanted “to do something for your country.” Officials obliged by honoring Van Oosten as Consul General, the first from Los Angeles and the second from California.

Thailand became a prime potential base to combat alternative political economies deemed threatening to the United States’s global free-market capitalist aspirations. U.S. state actors began referring to Thailand as a pro-Western bastion of anticommunism in Southeast Asia deserving of U.S. support. Edward F. Stanton, U.S. ambassador to Thailand from 1946–1953, described the country in a 1954 *Foreign Affairs* article as the “heart” and “cathedral” of the region. In February 1954 the U.S.-initiated Southeast Asian
Treaty Organization (SEATO), a security pact signed by eight countries to counter communist “aggression and subversion,” was established and headquartered in Bangkok, which formalized American involvement in Southeast Asia as well as made clear Thailand’s critical role in U.S. global communist containment. In addition to Thailand’s strategic geographic location for security, the United States was also interested in the country’s substantial resources and similar free-market enterprise system that offered ripe private investment opportunities for U.S. corporations.

Cultural producers also reinforced and distributed popular representations of Thailand as an adaptable nation in the service of U.S. intervention. Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s 1951 musical _The King and I_ was arguably the most far-reaching and influential narrative of Thai people and culture during the Cold War. _The King and I_ opened on Broadway and played in New York through 1954 with Gertrude Lawrence starring as Anna and Yul Brynner as King Mongkut. After touring nationally and in London, the show was shaped into a Twentieth Century Fox film in 1956. It won six academy awards with a wildly popular soundtrack that stayed on the charts for 274 weeks.

_The King and I_ delivered an epic tale about a real yet Americanized nineteenth-century British schoolteacher, Anna Leonowens, who is hired by King Mongkut of Siam to teach and guide Siam along Western lines to avoid colonization. Rodgers and Hammerstein depicted Thailand as backwards but, if trained properly, a candidate for joining the civilized First World. Through the figure of Anna, U.S. citizens were encouraged to see modernization projects as anticolonial struggles for self-determination rather than acts of colonial domination. The musical put forth the idea that racial Others like the Siamese, “rather than being exterminated, could be modernized through an intimate embrace.” As Christina Klein has argued, _The King and I_ functioned as a “spectacle of modernization” and captured the way the ideology of modernization extended beyond political officials and academics and became infused within middlebrow culture. In other words, the film offered an opportunity for the average American to participate in the Cold War by way of consumption.

U.S. social scientists were part of the first group to produce “intelligence” on Thailand in the early stages of the Cold War. As students and architects of modernization theory, these well-funded researchers became fascinated with the decolonizing world and its potential for social, political, and economic progress along Western lines. In 1947, the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University pioneered investigations on Thailand under the leadership of
Lauriston Sharp and the initiation of the Cornell Thailand Project. Sharphad spent a year as assistant director of the Southeast Asia Division of the State Department in 1945, launched the project (and later expanded it with a Rockefeller Foundation Grant in 1950) because, as he told the Christian Science Monitor in 1952: “Americans are just becoming aware of the political importance of the area. Yet our understanding of its peoples and cultures is far from adequate. There is a dangerous shortage of experts, and there are great gaps in our knowledge of even the most elementary facts.” The Cornell project, a hub of Thai Studies at the time, emphasized research, graduate education, and training students with a knowledge of the countries they will presumably work in via diplomatic corps and business. The Program disseminated this knowledge through the flagship “Data Paper Series,” a collection that included social scientific studies on Thai culture, behavior, and social structure, focusing on political and ideological changes as well as “the social and psychological effects of technological change” in rural Thailand.

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict produced a notable ethnographic study of Thai culture during World War II, published posthumously in 1952, in which she concluded that the lack of Thai parental authority and discipline toward infants and adolescents led to “Thai cheerfulness, easy conviviality, and non-violence” and could explain why Thais “gamble with pleasure, are indolent rather than hard-working and accept easily subordinate positions in a hierarchy.” To be sure, the academic interest in Thais was minimal at the time, but the research did reflect the growth and legitimacy of area studies in the United States. With funding and support from a range of U.S. government agencies and programs—both overtly and covertly—the interdisciplinary field produced research that had intellectual value while also shaping global counter-insurgency and development programs to further America’s Cold War policy objectives.

Social scientists were not the only educators in Thailand. The Agency for International Development’s (AID) University Contract program offers a vivid example of how U.S. education, as it insinuated itself into everyday Thai society, produced knowledge about Thais not only through academic research but also via personal interactions. U.S. educational programs were among the most impactful mechanisms of cultural diplomacy in Thailand. On July 1, 1950, an educational exchange agreement was signed between the United States and Thailand that led to the development of the Fulbright Foundation, spearheaded by U.S. Senator William J. Fulbright. Shortly after, a number of American organizations, many private, began to appear,
including the American University Alumni language center (AUA) in Bangkok funded by both the U.S. government and the private American University Alumni Association to help Thais develop English skills before leaving to study in the United States. Other organizations and programs included the Agency for International Development (AID), the Asia Foundation (TAF), the American Field Services (AFS), the Peace Corps, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

During the 1950s and 60s, professors from thirteen different American universities—including Indiana University, Wayne State University, Michigan State University, and the University of Texas at Austin—traveled to Thailand as participants in the AID University Contract program. The goal was to modernize Thai faculty practices and institutions of higher education along American lines. As advisers, U.S. educators carried out modernization and extended goodwill on the ground, working with Thai professors to bring American solutions to “Thai problems.” The process consisted of eliminating “authoritarian patterns of instruction,” restructuring laboratories and libraries, and introducing new textbooks. Advisers reported stumbling across numerous cultural barriers and difficulties in dealing with Thai cultural practices, specifically the Thai *mai bpen rai* attitude. From interactions at the College of Education in Bangkok, one frustrated counseling adviser from Indiana University believed that the Thai *mai bpen rai* attitude was a reflection of a deeply rooted Thai fatalistic approach to life that stood in stark contrast to American individualism. Other advisers took *mai bpen rai* to mean that Thais were much more leisurely than Americans and other “Orientals,” evidenced by the way they did not take appointments, schedules, or planning seriously. U.S. educators also considered *mai bpen rai* to be a practice of avoiding confrontation and therefore saw the attitude as unthreatening.

Another group of U.S. educators, U.S. Peace Corps volunteers, also drew on their first-hand experiences but constructed a more positive view of Thai people and Thailand as friendly, charming, and adaptable. The U.S. Peace Corps also sent volunteers to teach English, with other development efforts, across rural Thailand. John F. Kennedy spearheaded the Peace Corps in 1961 as a government cultural exchange program designed to induce warm attitudes toward the United States by fostering mutual understanding and peace through international development. The program shipped young, college degree holding Americans to participating countries around the world for various projects that included teaching English, malaria eradication, community development, rural health sanitation, irrigation building, and physical
education. Thailand welcomed their first group of forty-five Peace Corps volunteers on January 20, 1962.

While the mai bpen rai attitude resonated with Peace Corps volunteers as it did with the AID program advisers, the volunteers interpreted it as an endearing cultural quality. Peace Corps director John McCarthy, a lawyer from suburban Claremont, California and a former World War II officer in the Pacific who oversaw 385 volunteers in Thailand during the mid 1960s, explained to the Los Angeles Times upon his return to Southern California that mai bpen rai was a lifestyle. He believed that while the attitude caused some irritation among younger volunteers who wanted faster results, understanding and embracing it was important if the United States was to continue Thai people’s social and economic opportunities. McCarthy added that, as a whole, “Thais are a relaxed people” with a “highly developed sense of humor, using a play on words” and are “friendly, quick to smile, attractive with small features, adjustable, and are not rigid to strangers.”

Jerolyn “Jerri” Minor, a Peace Corps volunteer from Richmond, California, who taught in Chiang Mai from 1965 to 1967, recalled initially being attracted to Thailand only because her training for the corps was in the more familiar Honolulu, Hawaii. Minor was also intrigued because she had never heard of Thailand before the assignment—even pronouncing Thailand as “Thigh-land.” By the time her trip was over, however, her understanding of Thais mirrored the conceptions of her contemporaries. She fondly remembered Thais as “the epitome of friendliness . . . just lovely people . . . just beautiful people” and that “one of the things that made me so affectionate of the Thai people was this phrase mai bpen rai; it means you’re welcome, don’t worry about it, it’s okay.” U.S. academics and Peace Corps volunteers understood that successfully negotiating these types of face-to-face encounters was necessary to counter the perception of the “ugly American” and maintain good relations between the two nations. But in the process they also defined in rigid and static ways what it meant to be American versus Thai based on cultural traits.

By the mid 1960s, U.S. military officials and American GIs constituted the majority of the rapidly growing number of U.S. farang population in Thailand. At least 45,000 U.S. military personnel were stationed in Thailand in 1969. The influx and presence of U.S. farangs did not go unnoticed. A young Thai architect, Chumsai na Ayuthya, remembered first thinking that the growth in numbers of Americans was probably temporary—until he passed a fleet of U.S. Army trucks loaded with filing cabinets. “When the
American Army starts filing,” he told a *New York Times* reporter, “it’s there for a long time. You might as well get adjusted to it.” The boom was evident by the number of U.S. students enrolled at the International School Bangkok, which at the time was the largest school for U.S. citizens outside of the United States. The school, an eight-acre “piece of teenage America” in the heart of the Bangkok with palm trees, open-air classrooms cooled only by ceiling fans, and surrounded by a high hurricane fence, was initially established for the children of U.S. diplomats, businessmen, and military advisers living in Thailand. It opened in 1951 with an enrollment of seventy students who met inside an empty warehouse owned by the U.S. embassy. Ten years later, with the Vietnam War escalating, the enrollment rose to eight hundred and by 1966 the number was up to 2,700. The school was forced to open another campus on the outskirts of Bangkok to accommodate the growth. In 1968 school enrollment reached 3,600 students. Ninety percent were children of U.S. citizens—and overwhelmingly the children of U.S. military officials and diplomats.

**SEXUALIZING AND GENDERING THAIS**

Compared to U.S. educators, American military personnel played a more major, or at least more explicit, role in engendering and sexualizing Thais. The construction of U.S. military bases in the rural backwaters of northern and central Thailand led to the proliferation of military towns, stimulating a gendered and sexualized service-based leisure industry, or what Teresia Teaiwa calls “militourism.” Next to the bases, clusters of bars, massage parlors, and other garish nightlife operations sprang up almost overnight. One of the most visible aspects was the GI bar scene. Established primarily for U.S. soldiers but frequented by other U.S. citizens as well as Thais, GI bars served as the hub of a military town’s economy. The bars, some doubling as open-air restaurants, gave Thai villagers a chance to make money by offering services ranging from transportation to entertainment.

Inside the bars, customers indulged in alcohol, the latest U.S. popular music, and Thai women. GI bars either hired Thai women or the women simply freelanced in soliciting dances from patrons. Thai “women of the night” charged on average 50-70 baht ($2.50-$3.50) for up to an hour of dancing, handholding, and “necking,” and 150 baht ($7.50) and higher for an “after-hours” engagement. Peace Corps volunteer James Jouppi, who was assigned
to Nakohn Phanom in northern Thailand, recalled visiting a GI bar one night with friends and watching a “train of fifty young women dance to a strange rhythmic beat” called “the bump” where “the girls all held onto each other, each with her hands around the waist of the girl in front of her. . . . It wasn’t rock and roll, and yet it was much too sensual to be a folk dance.”

The money spent by a GI on this type of entertainment, whether in a crowded bar or an empty one, was reportedly enough to support “half of dozen Thais for a day.”

According to Jouppi, “bar girls,” as they were called, made enough money to go to the movies, buy Panasonic cassette tape recorders, and afford a wardrobe of tailor-made clothes.

Bangkok had transformed into a virtual playground for U.S. military men and tourists. GI bars with names like “Sorry about That,” “Why Not?,” and “Girl! Girl! Girl!” dominated Bangkok’s streets. Massage parlors targeting U.S. men also lined the streets. Although many of the parlors were located side by side along the street, they varied greatly in style. Some parlors operated out of small wooden houses on side streets. Others were large, air-conditioned establishments resembling gyms. New Petchburi Road, a street filled with newly erected luxury hotels, offered Thai-, Korean-, and Japanese-style massages in over fifty massage parlors. Thai masseuses on display in storefront windows enticed farangs who, once inside, could choose a masseuse to fit his liking and would pay from 30 to 70 baht ($1.50 to $3.50) for her services.

The U.S. military also designated different areas throughout Thailand as official rest and recreation (R&R) destinations for American GIs. R&R tours only added to the public brashness of the Cold War Thai sex industry. U.S. soldiers treated Thai prostitutes like girlfriends, whether strolling openly arm in arm or necking up and down the street. Between 1962 and 1976, at least 70,000 U.S. servicemen visited Thailand on three-day and seven-day R&R trips while taking a break from battle in Vietnam. They spent an estimated total of $22 million per year in the Thai economy, making the tours extremely lucrative for the Thai government. On New Petchburi Road in Bangkok (also known as the “American Strip”), U.S. soldiers entertained themselves at bars, nightclubs, strip clubs, brothels, and massage parlors catering to American GIs. Susan Cooper, a Peace Corps volunteer from 1969 to 1971, recalled in an interview that “a lot of soldiers came to Bangkok for R&R” and that the nearby Petchburi Hotel “was the scene of things that many of us have never seen before . . . and this was a hotel that was frequented by a lot of young ladies of the night.”

One of the most popular destinations was Pattaya Beach resort, about one hundred miles southeast of Bangkok in the Gulf of Thailand.
During the late 1960s, the U.S. military selected the quaint fishing village and leased a large section of beachfront property on which to create an official R&R center. In addition to erecting new hotels, bars, and “rock and roll joints,” U.S. officials also set up a daily hydrofoil service that brought GIs from Bangkok. When the servicemen arrived ashore, they were greeted by “Pattaya’s Hawaiians”—Thai women dressed in hula skirts, bikini tops, and leis.  

Not surprisingly, prostitution thrived under these conditions. It is certainly true that prostitution existed in Thai society before the arrival of U.S. servicemen. GIs and other U.S. citizens, however, eagerly participated in the Thai sex industry. What’s more, Thai prostitution became more lewd and gaudy during the American era, in that U.S. farangs and Thais approached prostitution quite differently. U.S. farangs searched for prostitutes in bars and massage parlors, but Thais searched out red-lighted brothels for their sex transactions. The Thai government also played a role in maintaining gender and sexual norms, with Thai military commanders identifying Thai prostitutes—who doubled as bar girls, masseuses, and dancers—as “special job workers.” The number of “special job workers” at Udorn Air Force Base, for example, grew rapidly from 1,246 in 1966 to 6,234 in 1972.  

Hierarchy among Thai prostitutes was also informed by U.S. consumers’ desires surrounding age and sexual purity. U.S. Peace Corps volunteer Mike Schmicker observed on one of his many trips to Bangkok that the “pretty girls” offered services to farangs at the large tourist and business hotels such as the Siam Intercontinental and Montien, earning several thousand baht a trick. But when Thai prostitutes were “ruined,” they ended up soliciting sex in Bangkok’s seedier slum establishments such as the Mosquito Bar—a two-story concrete “dive dumped on the banks of the Chao Phraya River.” 

Most importantly, U.S. soldiers treated Thai women as little more than sexual objects. They often described Thai women in racial, gendered, and sexualized terms that projected Thailand as a dangerous paradise. The plentiful opportunities for sexual pleasure made Thailand a paradise for off-duty U.S. soldiers, yet a significant number of Thai prostitutes carried venereal diseases. Of the 100,000 Thai prostitutes working in Bangkok during the late 1970s, for instance, 70 percent suffered from a venereal disease. U.S. soldier Gregory DeLaurier remembered being warned by his sergeant to “watch out for those LBFMs, son” as he first arrived in Thailand on an R&R tour. When DeLaurier responded to the acronym with confusion, the sergeant threw him a pack of condoms and spelled it out—“Little Brown Fucking Machines,
buddy. You don’t want your dick to fall off do you? These Thai honeys’ll fuck your brains out but goddamn won’t they give you the clap.”

In some cases, “one night in Bangkok” with Thai women developed into longer relationships and even marriage. Based on the accounts of U.S. soldiers at the time, U.S. servicemen went about getting a Thai wife in two ways. The first, and probably most common method, was to go to a GI bar or club, talk to an attractive Thai woman, and then ask if she had a husband or was in a relationship. If she was single, as was often the case since Thai men considered Thai bar girls to be tainted, then the U.S. soldier simply moved into her home (sometimes with her family members). They paid between 1,000 and 2,000 baht ($50-$100) per month for rent and all the services a woman, no less a wife, was expected to provide. The other option was for a U.S. serviceman to locate a Thai marriage broker. For around 1,000 baht ($50) the broker, typically an older Thai woman with an apparently steady supply of young Thai girls, introduced the GI to one of those girls. If he liked her, the GI then hired her as a mia chow or “rented wife” (also called a “duration wife”). This rental system was common practice in Bangkok but was even more prevalent around military bases.

What did U.S. servicemen find attractive about Thai women, aside from their ability to “fuck your brains out”? They were physically beautiful and, particularly, exotic. Journalist Lloyd Shearer expressed these views in the 1968 *Parade Magazine* article “Thailand is a Man’s World—and the G.I.’s Like It.” Shearer described Thai women to readers as “in the main, lovely creatures of a delicate porcelain beauty.” He also said Thailand’s Queen Sirikit and her physical beauty was a prime “reflection of the country’s enchanting young women” because she was “petite, demure, shapely, reserved.” Shearer added that rural Thai girls, due to their lighter skin, were prettier than girls from the city. Moreover, he also revealed that American GIs believed that Thai girls found their flirtty behavior and sexual advances irresistible.

Above all, U.S. servicemen sought out Thai wives because they could treat them as subordinates without consequence. U.S. servicemen credited Thai culture for preparing Thai girls through “tradition and training to treat men as superiors,” which produced a “sweetly feminine Oriental subordination.” A U.S. corporal joyfully explained it to Shearer: “None of that equality of the sexes over here. . . . You tell your chick what to do, and she does it.” A soldier from Oklahoma stationed at Udorn also described Thai wives as “honorable” and “pretty darn faithful” girls who “cook well, clean well, [and]
sew well. They’re industrious, conscientious, [and] easy to live with. They don’t make any demands. This is a man’s country all the way.” In essence, Thai women became consumable objects—a national resource that made the lives of U.S. servicemen easier and more leisurely. Or as Shearer put it, “[Thailand’s] most appealing, desirable commercial product is the native Thai girl.”

The number of GI children created personified the racial and sexual violence that U.S. militarization wreaked on Thai society, in addition to the fleeting yet frequent sexual encounters between U.S. servicemen and Thai women. By 1977, U.S. servicemen had fathered approximately 10,000 children with Thai women. Most of these children were conceived on legitimate terms and not simply during a night of passion. At Udorn Thani, a province in northeastern Thailand that was the site of one of the largest U.S. air bases, Thais depended on exchange with the base for nearly a decade as they sold food, homes, and in many cases, daughters. Here, U.S. servicemen paid anywhere from $150 to $300 for a *mia chow* to sleep with them, cook their food, wash their clothes, and ultimately bear their children. Many Thai women believed they were married to U.S. servicemen because they participated in Thai wedding ceremonies together. They soon found that the United States did not honor such ceremonies or unions as their “husbands” simply left for America. But considering the number of Thai women who entered the United States as war brides, many GIs did try to bring Thai women back with them. Nevertheless, as GI children were put up for U.S. adoption, one American diplomat lamented the growing idea that U.S. military officials should be held accountable. “No one forced their girls to sleep with our boys,” he said, “they did it voluntarily. Udorn wasn’t our colony.”

U.S. military intervention paved the way for nonmilitary U.S. citizens to travel to Thailand and interact with Thai society. They shaped the cultural and social life of the informal U.S. empire in Thailand and influenced American perceptions of Thai people and culture. This happened not simply because of U.S. mechanism of power and domination, such as formal diplomatic policies and military strength, but also because of the postwar U.S. tourism boom. While many Americans worked as policy makers in Washington, D.C., and under the auspices of the U.S. State Department, they also wanted to experience adventure and see the world. U.S. militourism had such a profound impact on Thai society, especially in bolstering the “industrialization of sex,” not only through militarization but because civilian tourism was used as a strategy for modernization and development. Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe has argued that when “tourism is imagined by local and foreign
economic planners to be a fast road to development,” it cultivates prostitution. And this was precisely the case in Thailand during the 1960s.

**U.S. Tourism in Thailand**

The knowledge about Thailand, Thai people, and Thai culture that emerged out of cultural productions, educational institutions and programs, and militourism was made possible by two related transformations during the 1950s and 1960s: The rise of post-World War II tourism to the Asian-Pacific region and the massive expansion of Thailand’s tourism industry and tourist-based infrastructure.

Technological advances in aviation contributed majorly to U.S. tourism abroad. The postwar aerospace industry’s reconversion of war aircraft into commercial airliners helped usher in the jet age, making U.S. travel more common. Yet technology alone does not cause human action. Many Americans became mass consumers with disposable income in the postwar era. By 1948 paid vacations had become standard in union agreements. With pent up energy for leisure, middle-class white U.S. citizens began embarking on getaways outside of the country for themselves and their children. In 1947 about 200,000 Americans had valid passports. In 1953 more than 1 million U.S. citizens traveled overseas and by the end of the 1950s roughly 7 million traveled abroad, mostly to Europe. Although only a few visited Asia and the Pacific (only 2 percent of all travelers in 1959), the postwar period experienced a boom in the number of travel writers, newspapers, magazines, and films that featured places like Taiwan, Burma, and Thailand. So contrary to standard historical accounts of Cold War American life that portray Americans as being bound to suburban homes and securing themselves in bomb shelters, U.S. citizens actually traveled abroad quite a bit during the postwar period.

U.S. tourism took on new meaning in the postwar world. U.S. state officials redefined the role of a tourist from just a sightseeing traveler to a bona-fide agent, representative, and diplomat of America. The U.S. State Department made a concerted effort to inform U.S. tourists that they were not merely travelers but U.S. ambassadors. With U.S. newspapers and magazines connecting increased tourism with anti-American sentiment and the ugly American epithet, the State Department encouraged American tourists to be on their best behavior overseas and to engage in meaningful exchanges to cultivate cultural understanding. In fact, in 1954 officials issued pamphlets and had
them placed into U.S. passports to remind U.S. tourists to “act in a manner befitting their station” and to warn them not to “assume an air of arrogance” or violate “the common bonds of decency.” Violating those bonds could, the State Department argued, “do more in the course of an hour to break down elements of friendly approach between peoples than the Government [could] do in the course of a year in trying to stimulate friendly relations.” U.S. tourists had become, in essence, “millions of ambassadors.” The new responsibility allowed everyday Americans to participate in the Cold War through travel.

The postwar period also witnessed the development of global tourist infrastructure designed to attract and accommodate travelers, which included the construction of airports, airstrips, paved roads, hotels, restaurants, shops, golf courses, and other entertainment venues. The U.S. travel industry lobbied for such development. Travel agents, for instance, realized that while U.S. tourists sought adventure abroad they wanted the exciting and foreign sights, sounds, and peoples to be kept a safe distance. Writing for the Los Angeles Times in 1958, Bert Hemphill, one of the leading figures in the U.S. travel industry and deemed one of the most traveled men on the planet, argued that tourist infrastructure was a necessity if nations wanted to profit from the postwar travel boom. Hemphill claimed that hotel rooms, hotel workers, and travel agents were all critical to the U.S. tourist experience, as travelers spent most of their time in hotel rooms and dealing with hotel staff. Hotels in particular offered security and a haven from exotic foods, people, and languages. “The people won’t come again unless they are comfortable,” wrote Bert, “the very experiences they sought unsettle them.”

U.S. tourists, it appeared, preferred to visit places only with proper amenities and palatable cultures.

Members of the travel industry believed that prying open foreign places for U.S. consumption with tourist infrastructure was an effective strategy for postwar modernization and development. On Bert Hemphill’s trip to Guatemala in November of 1946, he described Guatemala City as a place that has “prospered greatly since 18 years ago when I first visited . . . streets are paved, buildings are modern and the city boasts the finest airport in Central America.” He added that the Pan-American Highway, which began its multimillion dollar construction during World War II, had yet to be completed, making navigation through the countryside difficult for tourists. Postwar tourist development also flourished in parts of Africa—a continent amid numerous anticolonial struggles. When Bert surveyed “darkest Africa” in 1949 he observed, “the final conquest of Africa has been made possible by the modern plane.” Moreover, Hawaii, a U.S. colony deeply entangled
in U.S. militarization and tourism, underwent considerable infrastructure alteration as its tourist industry set travel records during the 1950s. As a popular destination for white U.S. travelers, missionaries, investors, and military officials fascinated by hula, the postwar period witnessed the expansion of Hawaii’s tourist-based service economy.\textsuperscript{73}

In 1952 the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA) was established in Honolulu, Hawaii to help institutionalize tourist development and encourage U.S. travelers to “discover the Pacific.” The association’s objectives included professionalizing and consolidating roughly 2,200 worldwide travel organizations, strengthening relationships between travel agents and government officials, bringing together the public and private sectors, lobbying governments to ease regulations on travel, and modernizing tourist facilities. PATA saw Asia and the Pacific region as the next big consumer product. They believed the region could inspire transpacific travel that rivaled and potentially exceed the level and popularity of transatlantic travel to Europe. In essence, PATA’s mission was to use tourism to help the people and cultures of Asia and the Pacific “move from post-World War II conditions of poverty to a position of global leadership.”\textsuperscript{74} This vision reinforced the U.S. government’s view of tourism as well. PATA underscored the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Luther H. Hodges’ view that tourists “bring wealth into a country . . . in the form of goodwill and understanding . . . [and] . . . wealth in the form of foreign exchange, vitally needed for international trade.”\textsuperscript{75}

There were enormous profits to be made in tourism. On June 2, 1959, hundreds of U.S. travel agents assembled at the Balboa Bay Club in Newport Beach, California for a banquet hosted by PATA and the American Society of Travel Agents (ASTA), a colorful affair that highlighted the cultural wonders of countries and peoples from Asia and the Pacific region. At dinner, an overwhelmingly white audience watched live cultural performances that played up the exotic magnificence of Asian and Pacific cultures and histories. The performances included singers and dancers, both men and women, from Hawaii, India, Japan, and the Philippines—all in their respective “traditional” regalia.\textsuperscript{76} The banquet was an extended effort to discuss strategies to develop Asia and Pacific travel facilities, which began in 1950 when the U.S. State Department sent official invitations to all Asian and Pacific countries to attend a conference in Hawaii held by the Pacific chapter of ASTA (which became PATA). Bert Hemphill was in attendance, joined by prominent government officials of travel and tourist bureaus and representatives of ship and airline companies, many from Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{77} The goal was to convince the
most influential figures in the booming $2 billion dollar a year international tourist industry that even more profits awaited in the “Pacific Area.”

PATA officials identified Thailand as a place with untapped tourist potential. The 1955 PATA handbook profiled the country and offered readers information on how to get to there, the climate, entry requirements, currency, language, and, of course, where to find clean, drinkable water. It informed travelers that a one-way sea fare via freighter-passenger service from a West coast port to Bangkok cost between $460 and $550, and would take a week or two. A round-trip flight on Pan American World Airways, the only commercial airline that offered flights to Bangkok from Los Angeles, Seattle or San Francisco, cost $1,180 for a tourist-class ticket and $1,400 for a first-class ticket—with an elapsed flying time of fifty-six hours. These fares made a trip to Bangkok from a U.S. West Coast city, both by ship or plane, among the most expensive.

The handbook portrayed the country as a romantic, welcoming land occupied by friendly natives. PATA called Thailand a “sentimental favorite for world travelers,” citing the “open-hearted charm and friendliness of the Siamese and the dreamlike fantasy of their capital city.” They described “the people of Thailand” as “Mongolian.” The handbook also revealed that Thais had ancestral roots to China and were similar to the Chinese not only in terms of physical features but also in language and cultural practices such as food. In a section on “Food and Water,” the agents wrote, “most restaurants serve ‘Chinese Food,’ including many delicacies from the land . . . a specialty is Siamese curries using Siamese rice, the finest in the Orient.”

At the time, however, Thai leaders and the Thai government had very little interest in tourism. An organized tourist industry did not exist. The country had a meager 871 tourist-standard rooms and roughly 50,000 visitors per year, with most staying in Bangkok for an average of two or three days. Then PATA intervened. They worked with Thai leaders and the Thai government to make tourism one of the country’s top priorities for postwar national development. In a 1958 report written for the U.S. Department of Commerce, PATA listed Thailand’s location as the “air center” of Southeast Asia, its “raw materials” of spectacular temples, “exceptionally interesting classical Thai dancing,” friendly people, and “colorful” way of life as key ingredients for a profitable tourist destination. Someone, they urged, just needed to package and sell it.

PATA’s efforts convinced the Thai government to jump-start the country’s tourist economy. Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat established the Tourism
Organization of Thailand (TOT) as part of the development planning and the promotion of tourism.\textsuperscript{83} Thanarat strongly supported PATA’s suggestion for TOT to work closely with the Thai government and, most importantly, collaborate with outside specialists and business leaders holding private capital. Furthermore, PATA laid out guidelines and projections, based on empirical research, for Thai leaders to follow: (1) network with other Asian and Pacific nations to develop a regional plan for tourist development; (2) assure the construction of first class accommodations of 1,200 new hotel rooms totaling $18 million; (3) develop an effective, long-term promotional and marketing program; and (4) eliminate government barriers on travelers such as expediting customs procedures, reducing immigration paperwork, and liberalizing visa formalities. Finally, PATA recommended that Thailand “encourage the preservation of Thai art and customs” and that “further study will have to be given to ways and means of retaining their charm and preventing its deterioration and commercialization.”\textsuperscript{84}

The 1960s witnessed a frenzy of tourist infrastructure construction and the formation of a first-rate tourist industry in Thailand that catered increasingly to U.S. \textit{farang}. In 1970, U.S. citizens constituted the largest group, about 150,000, of the total six hundred thousand visitors to Thailand.\textsuperscript{54} The Thai government, through TOT, invested heavily in the capital and offered incentives to private investors to build new airport runways, highways, retail shops, bars, restaurants, R&R sites, and hotels. This rapid development turned a swamp rice field and fruit orchards into New Petchburi Road.\textsuperscript{85} By mid-decade, about half of the nation’s approximately 650 night-clubs, bars, and massage parlors could be found in Bangkok. In addition, Thailand built a majority of its tourist-class hotels in the 1960s. In 1966 alone, fourteen first-class luxury hotels opened in Bangkok, such as the Siam Intercontinental (cost of 500,000 baht to construct each room) adding 2,500 more tourist-standards rooms and raising the country’s total number to 7,064.\textsuperscript{86}

The Thai government’s investment in the tourist industry, which at its height from 1967 to 1971 generated 360 million baht ($18 million) in taxes to the Thai government, raised concerns among U.S. citizens and Thais.\textsuperscript{87} In particular, both groups wondered whether the U.S. tourist presence constituted “progress” or an encroachment on Thai culture. As more and more U.S. citizens visited bars, coffee shops, hotels, and shopping centers, U.S. officials in Washington became increasingly concerned over their behavior. Yet, several American observers found Thais to be tolerant of U.S. visitors. “Americans
were hated around the globe during the Vietnam War,” wrote Mike Schmicker, “but not in Thailand. . . . The Thais I met were fascinated by America, its incredible wealth its anything-goes society and its technological prowess.”88 Others believed that Thais treated foreigners with more acceptance than other Asian nations because of Thailand’s history as the only Southeast Asian country to have avoided Western colonialism. “The Thais,” observed New York Times journalist William Warren, “have no colonial past to brood over.”89

But U.S. tourism did in fact spawn criticism from Thais. The seemingly endless construction of tourist-friendly places made clear to Thais that an economy based so heavily on tourism was only going to focus on and serve outside interests at the expense of the local population. The money used to develop a tourist infrastructure complete with bowling alleys and luxury hotels had come to stand in for anything resembling an urban policy in Bangkok. Instead of using money to improve education, housing, and other public works, the Thai government and Thai leaders made the decision to transform Bangkok’s urban landscape into a leisure getaway for U.S. tourists and wealthy Thai socialites. Those who spoke out against the negative social, cultural, or economic impact of tourism on Thai society were described as a small faction of traditionalists who stood in the way of modern progress in Thailand.

The U.S. tourism boom and the development of Thailand’s tourist infrastructure enabled the leisure consumption of nearly all things Thai: manufactured goods, cultural performances, and women’s bodies, to name a few. It gave rise to specific types of tourism. One of the more popular types was culinary tourism. Thailand’s tourist infrastructure provided U.S. tourists, particularly white American women, with networks and pathways that allowed them to travel and move throughout the country and discover Thai cuisine. In the process, culinary tourism turned foodways into a site for the construction of the Thai neocolonial subject. In addition, U.S. culinary tourism altered Thai food culture as dramatically as it did the nation’s urban landscape, countryside, and beaches. It would further corner Thailand and Thai people into a service-based economy.

**CULINARY TOURISM AND THAIS AS AN EXOTIC “OTHER”**

U.S. global expansion into Thailand secured and facilitated access to new markets, new people, and new foodways. On one hand, Thailand’s rising
tourist economy adapted Thai food culture to meet the desires and demands of U.S. tourists. Hotels and restaurants offering private dining experiences with a Western sequence of courses started appearing in Bangkok along with an assortment of foreign restaurants—Korean, Lebanese, Hungarian, Japanese, Italian, French, Mexican—in part to attract U.S. diplomats, businessmen, and military officials. Several restaurants served hamburgers and chili con carne and were constantly filled with “homesick Americans” looking for food but also other Americans. Newly created classical Thai dinner-and-dance shows also became popular, as they catered to more wealthy tourists and visitors who could experience a staged authentic version of Thai cuisine in the palace-like setting of “Old Siam.”

On the other hand, U.S. tourism in Thailand created less formal and less controlled social spaces that allowed tourists to have more intimate, organic interactions with Thai food practices. The experiences of U.S. Peace Corps volunteers provide a glimpse at how white U.S. citizens, especially women, approached Thai food with curiosity and excitement in culinary contact zones. Volunteers commonly made fond references to their first tastes and smells of Thai food when recalling their Peace Corps assignments during the mid to late 1960s. Marianne May Apple, a volunteer from San Diego, California, assigned to Trat Province in southeastern Thailand, explained in a letter to her parents on May 24, 1966, that “the food really takes getting used to. It all has a distinctive taste and most of it is so hot that you think you’re on fire.” In another letter to her sister later that year, Apple wrote: “My teacher . . . usually invites me to lunch on Sat[urday] after I finish teaching. Last time we had crab eggs and blood—good[,] believe it or not! . . . I think I will write a Thai cookbook . . . because I have so many recipes that are of more a variety than those in the book at home.” At the request of her parents, Apple also photographed Thai ingredients and dishes and suggested that the family plant a small Thai pepperbush, and find lemon grass and kaffir limes so that they could make “authentic” Thai food.

Barbara Hansen first encountered Thai food in Thailand during the 1960s. Hansen, a food columnist for the Los Angeles Herald Examiner who was born and raised in Los Angeles, visited Bangkok twice during a three-month freighter trip through Asia in the 1960s. She stayed at the Royal Hotel in the heart of the city near the landmark Democracy monument. Here Hansen first tasted Thai food. She vividly recalls walking down from her hotel past the monument “to a restaurant called [Methavalai] Sorndaeng” that had “no air conditioning, no nothing, and nobody but Thais in there.
And the food, oh I was enchanted, oh it was so wonderful!” Meda Croizat from Santa Monica, California also had her first encounter with Thai food around this time. The gourmet chef, home economics teacher, and “international hostess” traveled throughout Asia during the Cold War and became “Gung Ho for Oriental Cookery.” She tried her first Thai dish in the 1950s in Bangkok where her husband, a U.S. Marine colonel, was stationed. By the late 1960s, Croizat had over twenty years of experience with Chinese cooking and developed a taste for and better understanding of Thai food. She described Thai cuisine as unique in comparison to other Asian foods because of the “spiciness of the curries and by the unusual and abundant fruits.” Croizat especially liked mee krob, a sweet crispy noodle dish she said was a “favorite with all of us.”

Then there was, of course, Marie Wilson. Wilson became smitten with Thai cuisine when she traveled to Thailand in 1952 to marry her fiancé, who was teaching English in Bangkok as a Fulbright scholar. At first, Wilson recalled, “everything was so strange, I thought I would never get used to the very spicy foods, the humid, hot weather or the family customs.” The
newlyweds, along with their newborn daughter Elizabeth, spent the next year and a half living in the country, of which she knew nothing upon arrival. But soon the “romance of Siam” swept her. She grew to love Thai food for its rich and highly seasoned dishes that “happily” combined Indian and Chinese origins. She found the greatest pleasure, however, in the cuisine’s hot and spicy flavors: “we soon learned that hot food was only a Western idea but we never gave up trying to convince our cooks [hot] was better.”

New tastes, smells, sights, and sounds defined the encounters. The spiciness or hotness of some dishes awoke new parts of the palate for the culinary adventurers. Taste and smell informed Wilson’s memory of Thailand or what she often, perhaps nostalgically, referred to as “Siam.” In Siamese Cookery Wilson promised her readers that “new herbs and spices will fill your house with appetizing odors and make meal time an exciting adventure.”

Jennifer Brennan, who first traveled to Thailand in the early 1960s to pursue opportunities for her [silk] business, fell in love with Thai food because of its “indescribable mixture of flavors.” As Brennan wrote in The Original Thai Cookbook, she was particularly impressed by the way Thai food awoke all the human senses: “elaborate preparation and decoration of each dish; unusual aromas; fragrant jasmine to pungent shrimp paste; a variety of textures and combination of finger foods; percussive musical sounds of fresh, juicy vegetables first contacting hot oil in a wok; and the rhythmic beat of a cleaver rapidly chopping on a board, counterpointed by the cadence of the ‘thunk, thunk’ of a mortar hammering a pestle—all climaxed by the incomparable, savory taste delight that is Thai.”

Within a few years, U.S. culinary adventurers like Wilson and Brennan developed an understanding of “authentic” Thai cuisine in the 1960s. They learned that unlike Western dinners that emphasized the main course, khao (white rice) was the centerpiece of a Thai meal. Khao was to contrast the highly seasoned and bold flavors of other, typically meat-based, dishes to be eaten with it, such as soup, curry, a steamed dish, or fried dish. Sauces, like nam plah (fish sauce), accompanied these dishes. In addition, culinary explorers discovered that “Thais are very fond of sweetmeats” and dessert was “always special” in a Thai meal, which often ranged from sweet custards to fresh fruit—pineapple, mangosteen, rambutan, and durian. They also found that Thais placed a great deal of importance on the decoration and appearance of dishes.

Wilson and Brennan also became experts on Thai ingredients, cooking methods, equipment, and the kitchen. In addition to rice, meat, fish, and
vegetables, they familiarized themselves with fundamental ingredients in Thai cooking such as coconut and coconut milk, garlic, tamarind, coriander, lemon grass, and flower flavorings and essences. They knew that chili peppers were a key ingredient used not just in the cooking process but also as garnishes during a meal. And both developed a working knowledge of the adobe-like stoves and charcoal pots inside Thai kitchens, along with woks, aluminum steamers, and, of course, the stoneware mortar and pestle used to pound ingredients like chili peppers, spices, and coconut flesh to “smooth, creamy substances.”

This growing fascination with Thai foodways embodied two different yet interrelated trends. First, it reflected Christina Klein’s Cold War “global imaginary of integration”—a comprehensive framework that depicted the world as a place with porous borders and encouraged ordinary U.S. citizens to build cultural understanding in order to win the hearts and minds of peoples in Asia and the Pacific. As the liberal counterpart to the culture of containment, such integration, ideally, would allow the United States to demonstrate to the world, especially amid rising anticolonial movements in the “darker nations,” that it would lead not with force but by integrating Asia and the Pacific under U.S. influence and benevolence. Culinary tourists helped translate U.S. foreign policy objectives into sentimental and sensory bonds with Thailand for American consumers, breathing life into a broader “Cold War Orientalism.” Second, it also reflected what Lisa Heldke calls “cultural food colonialism”—an “attitude problem” rooted in a colonial thirst for authenticity, adventure, and novelty among whites that could be quenched by finding and appropriating exotic cuisine. It was, in a sense, an edible version of “imperialist nostalgia.” This attitude justified U.S. political and economic forms of imperialism and neocolonialism in the region. Together, the global imaginary of integration and cultural food colonialism captured the way U.S. citizens participated in the drama of U.S. global expansion through everyday practices of food.

The more knowledge they gained, the more authority U.S. culinary tourists felt they had over not only Thai food but also the intricacies of Thai society. Thai food became a quick and easy window into Thai history, culture, and the hearts and minds of Thai people. Encounters with Thai food allowed them to play a key role in constructing an idealized image of Thailand and Thai people that appealed to the desires of white U.S. consumers. Brennan’s narrative celebrated Thai cuisine as the embodiment of Thailand’s history of political craftiness and flexibility. She considered Thailand’s “bend,
not break” posture in the face of “prevailing winds, whether political, martial, religious or cultural” as a “trait” that allowed the nation to maintain its independence and sovereignty amid European colonialism and war with neighboring groups in Southeast Asia.109

The result, according to Brennan, was not a mere regional adaptation of Chinese food, but a combination of indigenous T’ai, Chinese, Indian, and even Portuguese influences that evolved over thousands of years of “emigration, confrontation, and accommodation.” The early Siamese, or T’ai, ate rice, fish, and game with sauces of garlic, peppercorns, and ginger. The Chinese contributed soups, noodles, other meats (duck), and stir-fry cooking methods. Indian and Arab merchants from the Middle East introduced cardamom, coriander, cumin, and other spices along with antecedents to Thai dishes, such as curries and satay. And the Portuguese brought small yet fiery chili peppers in the early 1500s, which flourished in Thailand’s soil. For Brennan and others, one group’s food culture did not obliterate another. Instead, the complex yet well-balanced flavors of Thai cuisine in the 1960s was rooted in one main characteristic of Thailand and Thai people: their ability to seamlessly “absorb foreign influences and translate them into something uniquely Thai.”110 In short, Thai food was testament to Thailand’s history of foreign relations.

Thai foodways provided a gateway into the rhythm and pace of Thai life and society. With an ethnographic approach and tone similar to their academic counterparts, U.S. culinary adventurers painted a picture of a premodern, idyllic existence but also a modern “melting pot.” Although seemingly contradictory, these visions together highlighted the rustic origins and unified elements of Thai cuisine that was to represent Thailand as a whole. In Siamese Cookery Wilson wrote based on her experience in Bangkok that “it does not take long to realize that the Siamese are a water people... restaurant boats selling curries, coffee, and cake.” “And on these boats,” she marveled, “whole families spend their lives, selling, cooking, and eating, especially cooking and eating which the Siamese love to do. Everywhere, on water or on land, the charcoal stove on which rice is being cooked is fanned by a man, woman, or child. Every hour of the day I saw families squatting in a circle, laughing, talking, and eating their rice.”111

Brennan observed a slightly different Thai population that was more demographically diverse. She described Bangkok as a city of contrasts filled with striking “kaleidoscopic” crowds of people: “Small, dark southern Thai, their flattened features showing a kinship to the Malays; paler skinned
Northerners; Chinese merchants; bearded and turbaned Sikhs; saffron-robed monks with shaved heads; aristocrats, whose aquiline features betray an ancient Brahmin heritage, and . . . school children in spotless uniforms.”

All of these people, she believed, represented Bangkok. Yet from out of these differences, Brennan concluded, stood a distinct, one-of-a-kind Thai culture as these groups transcended racial, ethnic, national, regional, and religious lines and blended together to create a strong common identity. As if she formulated her view using contemporary U.S. assimilation theories, Brennan asserted that Thais, “as a race,” have their origins “far from their present homeland. Their religion is an adaptation of Indian Buddhism. Their language is a synthesis of several tongues. Their culture is an amalgam of those of their neighbors—yet they possess an ethnic cohesiveness lacking in other Southeast Asian countries.”

For U.S. culinary tourists, Thai food best exemplified this uniform Thai culture.

The romanticized view flattened power relations between white Western nations and Thailand. For instance, when Brennan applauded Thailand’s ability to remain independent and sovereign, she implied that Thais were on an equal playing field and even had an advantage over Europeans. “In the winds of colonial wars,” she wrote, “European oak could crack while the Thai bamboo would bend but, invariably, whip back to its firmly rooted, original posture.”

The depictions also ignored power relations within Thailand. While culinary tourists acknowledged the history of political disputes and wars between the T’ai and other groups in the region—such as the Chinese, Burmese, and Khmer—they masked, under the veil of a harmonious multiculturalism, the process by which these groups became incorporated into the Thai nation and the subsequent social divisions and unequal positions they held in society.

In the mid twentieth century the heavily militarized and dictatorial Thai nation-state, bolstered by U.S. support, intensified efforts to craft a unified imagined Thailand out of its diverse citizenry as part of its pursuit of development and anticommunism. They demanded that all adopt the Thai language, convert to Buddhism, publicly display loyalty, and in essence embrace the national ideology of “nation, religion, and king.” Thai leaders often resorted to violence and arrests to manufacture this homogenous Thai identity and culture, especially in areas with different religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions than what the Thai nation-state envisioned, such as in the southern provinces where the majority of people spoke a Malay dialect and practiced Islam. They were consumed with trying to purge the nation and its
history of all things Chinese over the fear of communist infiltration. In fact, food was a vehicle for extending nationalist ideology. In the 1940s, Prime Minister Phibunsongkhram’s nationalist movement led to the creation of what would become the iconic wok-fried noodle dish, Pad Thai. Phibunsongkhram wanted a symbolic “Thai” national dish to counter the cultural influence of Thailand’s Chinese population. Thus, when U.S. culinary tourists celebrated Thais for their ability to blend differences and create a common culture they failed to recognize power, as it was a coerced movement into a dominant culture.

Cookbook authors had no reason or desire to highlight the history and violence of colonialism, nationalism, ethnocentrism, and social rifts. And culinary tourists did not want to confront any of it either. So the issue was not so much that Wilson and Brennan willfully ignored or misrepresented Thai society to build a romanticized version of Thailand. Rather, they believed, like fellow ethnographers and social scientists, that they were revealing the core of Thai history, people, and culture. The issue was that they, with some level of awareness, helped produce an idealized rendering they wanted to believe existed. As culinary adventurers, they enticed U.S. consumers to Thailand with the promise of an exotic paradise where local natives catered to all of the senses. For Wilson and Brennan, Thai food culture—its feel, sights, smells, morals, ethics, and behaviors—could best introduce this fantasy.

In a way, authoring and publishing some of the first Thai cookbooks outside of Thailand constituted a colonial practice that allowed white American women to become and act as authorities on Thai food. Taking cooking methods that were passed down orally and then publishing them in written form enabled these women to establish expertise and ownership of a food culture different from their own. Translating so-called inaccessible cooking methods into recipes during the Cold War standardized and thus “modernized” Thai food practices into a science in which ingredients could be measured, cooked, and replicated inside the home with new appliances. Also, being the first to present recipes in English turned them into authorities because they, by default, appeared to be the only ones with knowledge on the topic.

Writing and publishing cookbooks meant more than introducing Thai cuisine, ingredients, recipes, and cooking methods. In her critique of the Indian-born food writer and actress Madhur Jaffrey, Parama Roy argues that the most compelling cookbooks are hardly ever utilitarian or simply just a
collection of useful recipes for the home cook. On the contrary, they offer “autobiography rather than the recipe.” Thai cookbooks served as a platform for white housewives to present themselves as worldly, cultured individuals and explorers of foreign cultures with exciting stories to tell. As cultural outsiders, they had to convince their audience of adventurous readers that the collection of Thai recipes was indeed authentic and vastly different. To achieve this, authors almost always detailed their extensive travel through Thailand and submersion into Thai society and life. They demonstrated knowledge of Thai ingredients and mastery over cooking techniques. And they played up their personal relationships with “native informants” to not only authenticate recipes but also to show a willingness to accept exotic Others. Jennifer Brennan was skillful at using autobiographical narrative in her cookbooks to represent people and places as exotic. Yet, she was especially adept at supplying memories that spurred a sense of nostalgia among her readers—even for those who had never experienced the food first-hand. For instance, Brennan’s *Curries and Bugles*, a memoir-cookbook on Indian cuisine under British colonialism she published several years after *The Original Thai Cookbook*, was well received in Britain for the way it conjured a “Raj nostalgia” ethos. Britain’s national newspaper described *Curries and Bugles* as “the perfect present for anyone who has had connections with the subcontinent, but for those who haven’t she also manages to create an aching sense of nostalgia.”

So while American culinary tourists found excitement in getting to know an exotic culture, they also reinforced uneven power relationships and colonial dynamics. The insatiable appetite for Thai cuisine was at once a feeling and longing for colonialism, or imperialist nostalgia. They received enormous pleasure in Thai foodways because during meals they got to experience what it was like to be truly revered, respected, and catered to by Others whose main goal appeared to be to service their every need. In *The Original Thai Cookbook* Brennan set an old colonial backdrop and invited readers to imagine themselves at the center of the story: “It is dusk in Bangkok and you are going out to dinner. The chauffeured Mercedes 280 sweeps you from your luxury hotel through streets lined with large, spreading trees and picturesque tile-roofed wooden shops and houses . . . Delicious smells of spiced, barbequed chicken and pungent curries assail your nostrils and sharpen your appetite as your car passes little street-front restaurants.” “You pull up before a traditional teakwood Thai house,” she continued, “greeted by an exquisite, delicately boned Thai woman, youthful but of indeterminate age.” Brennan
next walked readers through a Thai meal: “seated in these ornate chairs, you are aware of a soft voice at your elbow as another slender girl in traditional Thai dress offers drinks and places a bronze tray filled with an assortment of tiny hors d’oeuvres before you.” She closed the narrative, “you rise at the behest of your hostess and are escorted into a steeply beamed, large room. . . . You try to sit down as gracefully as your tall, angular Western frame will allow” and are served “a parade of unfamiliar and exotic dishes.” So in addition to new flavors, tastes, and textures, a major appeal of Asian and Pacific food culture was the chance to experience being atop a global racialized social hierarchy—to be revered as colonizers of old.

U.S. global expansion in Thailand allowed white U.S. citizens to bring their Thai culinary discoveries back home, especially to Los Angeles. In addition to authoring cookbooks like Siamese Cookery and The Original Thai Cookbook, they also threw dinner parties and taught cooking classes to introduce Thai cuisine to other white suburbanites. When Marie Wilson returned home to West Los Angeles she regularly cooked Thai food for fellow housewives. The rave feedback she received after “enchanting” them with hot and spicy dishes inspired Wilson to publish her cookbook. When Brennan returned to Los Angeles in the 1970s she had accumulated over twenty years of travel experience in East and Southeast Asia, India, and Pakistan. She also taught Chinese and Indian cooking during her travels. Brennan’s sensory experiences and knowledge of Thai food compelled her to teach evening Thai cooking classes for white housewives in the recreation room of her Santa Monica apartment building. Her $30 courses, based on participation rather than typical demonstration, were often overcrowded.

The booming interest in Thai foodways was part of a much broader fascination with “Oriental” cookery sweeping white suburbanites during the Cold War. Although middle- and upper-class white Americans had been eating in Chinese restaurants since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (when it was considered urban slumming with the dirty Chinese), the postwar period witnessed the increased popularity of Asian cuisine and restaurants. For suburbanites, spending a night out at an Oriental restaurant was a meaningful social and cultural experience. At the time most Chinese establishments served Cantonese and Mandarin dishes in addition to the more familiar “chop-suey”—a stir-fried dish of meat, eggs, bean sprouts, cabbage, and celery in a thickened sauce. Restaurant owners also catered to non-Asian guests, developing Western-style menus with combination dinners that had diners choosing a set meal from either column A or B. Owners also
decorated their restaurants in ways that played up to white fantasies of Asia and the Pacific. In the 1950s, for example, Trader Vic’s tiki-themed restaurant at the Savoy Hotel in New York City became a huge hit as customers came in droves for the tropical drinks, especially the *mai tais*. Although Trader Vic’s represented Polynesian fare, they mainly served Cantonese dishes including *rumaki* (Polynesian hors d’oeuvre usually made with water chestnuts and duck or chicken liver wrapped in bacon), crab Rangoon (deep-fried wonton with crab and cream cheese filling), and Calcutta lamb curry as well as egg rolls, fried rice, wonton soup, barbecued pork, almond chicken, and beef with tomato. Restaurants like Trader Vic’s were so popular that they inspired copycats such as the Kon-Tiki Club in Chicago, which advertised “escape to the South Seas!” and offered a complete Cantonese dinner for $1.85 to $3.25. The craze for Polynesian-style restaurants serving Cantonese food continued well into the 1970s, popping up in different parts of the United States.

Outside of restaurants, the growing interest in Asian and Pacific cuisine manifested in a variety of ways in lily-white suburbs with very few Asians or Asian Americans (and in many cases historically hostile toward Asians). A number of white women authored cookbooks filled with recipes they appropriated from peoples they came in contact with. Many suburban housewives hosted dinner parties featuring foreign dishes and, for some, costumes. Others displayed their expertise by teaching cooking classes and demonstrations for local civic organizations, church groups, and clubs. In Los Angeles’ San Gabriel Valley in 1963, Margo Wells provided a cooking demonstration of “Oriental foods” to the Alhambra-San Gabriel Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution as part of their “Oriental Hour” themed benefit brunch. The PATA banquet hosted in Newport Beach in 1959 also featured Asian and Pacific food as one of the more delicious rewards of traveling to the region. Guests indulged in epicurean delights of Australian rock-shell oysters on the half shell, Indian spiced Mulligatawny soup, New Zealand lamb chops, Japanese sake, coconut sauce from the Philippines, and Kona coffee and fresh pineapple spears from the newly admitted state of Hawaii.

White American women, particularly suburban housewives, were integral to introducing Asian and Pacific foodways to adventurous eaters inside the United States. Their access to and participation in food cultures was more than just an “attitude problem.” It can be considered a colonial practice in and of itself, as they extracted recipes and culinary practices as raw materials and turned them into commodities to be sold in the U.S. marketplace.
benefitted by becoming authorities and in being recognized for their “discovery” of foodways that were not new—except to white American consumers.

Yet at the same time, the cookbooks, cooking courses, and dinner parties reflected their attempts to elevate their social status to challenge Cold War gender roles and suburban life. The “insatiable appetite” for Oriental cookery happened simultaneously with the postwar construction of suburban whiteness, characterized by intense cultural crackdowns and conformity, particularly around gender conventions. In a moment when nearly everything looked the same—houses, appliances, cars, and even the housewives themselves—one way they distinguished themselves was to deliver new flavors, tastes, smells, and stories. They relied on exotic tastes, smells, and problematic representations and performances of Oriental Others to make themselves appear more interesting, cultured, and unique to stand out from other suburban homemakers. But as white women used Asian and Pacific food culture to negotiate gender conventions, these acts of culinary appropriation also worked to construct and affirm their whiteness.

Most importantly, U.S. Cold War intervention in Asia and the Pacific allowed these women to move through and between the expanding U.S. empire to profit “at home.” The U.S. global postwar infrastructure of military bases, embassies, financial institutions, businesses, private organizations, aid programs, and hotels led to the creation of transnational pathways, networks, and spaces for U.S. citizens to engage food cultures in different parts of the world for the first time. U.S. citizens devoured Asian and Pacific food with great enthusiasm as they traveled the Cold War world as volunteers, tourists, or simply to join spouses. It was under these conditions that white Americans “fell in love” with Oriental cuisine—and how others came to know and love food cultures of Asia and the Pacific. Foodways allowed white American women to participate in the drama of postwar U.S. empire.

**NEGOTIATING U.S. EMPIRE THROUGH FOODWAYS**

Thai food culture enlivened Thailand’s U.S.-centered tourist industry and created the conditions for a neocolonial economy to flourish. The largely informal U.S. tourist encounters with Thai cuisine sparked a nascent culinary tourism in the 1960s that, even in its early stages, cornered Thailand and Thai people into a service-based economy. To borrow from historian Hal Rothman, the Thai government entered into a “devil’s bargain,” catering to
the gustatory desires of U.S. consumers at the expense of the basic needs of local populations. Culinary tourism benefited interests outside of communities it was supposed to make economically viable in the first place. Fueled by the global imaginary of integration and cultural food colonialism, culinary tourism would alter the Thai economy and food systems.

Yet, Thais had their own goals and expectations of their encounters with U.S. tourism and culinary tourists. Adria Imada, Jana Lipman, and Dennis Merrill have illustrated that postwar U.S. tourism, as the cultural counterpart to U.S. political and economic imperialism, was not an all-powerful, uniform, or one-directional system of domination. It was a “textured and fluid structure” of inequality and resistance that hosts interacted with from the bottom up. As the country’s service sector economy boomed, Bangkok transformed into a playground for U.S. tourists (and wealthy Thai socialites). The development of hotels, restaurants, coffee shops and other leisure spaces attracted young Thai men and women from the rural countryside. They went to the city, learned English, and made money working service jobs—as waiters and waitresses, bartenders, hotel receptionists, tour guides, and souvenir shop clerks. Luxury hotels in particular provided a space for Thais to learn fruit, vegetable, ice, and butter carving to entertain tourists. Thais on the lower end of the social order, especially Thai women, found that packaging and peddling Thai food culture to tourists was a viable economic prospect.

The intimate encounters that took place within Thailand’s culinary contact zones also made it possible for Thais to negotiate and resist the increased American influence in all sorts of ways beyond formal commercial exchanges. One of the more typical forms involved Thai domestic servants who took personal advantage of American visitors—especially those who made the mistake of assuming that all Thais could cook good Thai food. To Marie Wilson, Thai cooks and servants were “indispensable” in helping with the adjustment to Thailand. During their time in the country, the Wilson family hired Thai domestic servants to shop at the local market and cook meals. However, Wilson recalled being “either ‘squeezed’ on the food money, or forced to care for dozens of the cooks’ ne’er-do-well relatives, or fed poorly cooked food, or just not fed enough.” The family, she wrote, “felt put upon, deprived, and bullied.” While her servants had introduced the family to Thai cuisine, they apparently (and quite literally) left a bad taste in the Wilsons’ mouths.

Culinary contact zones also allowed ordinary Thais to meet American officials and distinguished travelers, especially in hotels. They struck up
conversations and developed friendships. In some cases, Thais learned of new culinary opportunities in the United States. Above all, what happened in Thailand did not stay in Thailand. U.S. tourism and culinary encounters that took place within the context of U.S. intervention meant that the legacy of an intensive U.S. foreign presence would play itself out within the formal boundaries of the United States. The combination of U.S. Cold War politics and tourist culture paved the way for U.S. citizens to participate in the construction of imaginings of Thailand and Thai people, to have direct contact with Thai food, and to fuel the appetite for the exotic Other’s cuisine. It also set the stage for Thai migration to the United States. The informal U.S. empire and immigration functioned as part of a “single global phenomenon” that stimulated the movement of both foods and people to the United States. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, Thai immigrants negotiated the social, political, and economic consequences of U.S. empire through foodways.