



From culinary appeal to national influence: Vietnamese cuisine, soft power, and nation branding in the global cultural economy

Vu Thu Hien

University of Finance - Marketing, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66856/ijssh.2026.8.3.8134>

Abstract

Vietnamese cuisine has achieved increasing international visibility through iconic foods such as phở, bánh mì, Vietnamese coffee, and a diverse regional culinary heritage. Yet global recognition of food does not automatically translate into national reputation, cultural influence, or economic value. This study examines how Vietnam can convert its culinary attractiveness into a more systematic source of soft power and nation branding in the global cultural economy. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary-data analysis, policy-document review, and comparative evidence from Thailand, Japan, and Singapore, the study develops a Culinary Soft Power Conversion Framework linking culinary resources, strategic mediation, international experience, national reputation, and cultural-economic value creation. The findings reveal a significant conversion gap. Vietnam ranked 14th globally in the “food the world loves” attribute of the 2026 Global Soft Power Index but only 52nd overall, suggesting that its culinary attractiveness exceeds its broader capacity to transform cultural appeal into international influence. The study argues that closing this gap requires an integrated strategy combining culinary branding, overseas restaurant networks, diaspora participation, culinary tourism, food exports, digital storytelling, and cross-sectoral institutional coordination. Vietnamese cuisine should therefore be treated not merely as cultural heritage but as a strategic asset connecting culture, diplomacy, tourism, trade, and national competitiveness.

Keywords: Cultural economy, culinary soft power, gastrodiploacy, nation branding, Vietnamese cuisine

Introduction

The structure of international influence has changed substantially in the twenty-first century. Military capabilities and economic resources remain fundamental components of national power, but states increasingly compete through reputation, cultural attractiveness, values, narratives, and the ability to generate affinity among foreign publics. Nye (2004) conceptualizes this capacity as soft power, or the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or material inducement.

Within this broader transformation, food has become an increasingly important medium of cultural communication. Unlike many forms of cultural diplomacy that depend on formal institutions or specialized audiences, cuisine enters everyday life. People may encounter another nation through restaurants, street food, culinary tourism, television programs, social media, food festivals, chefs, agricultural products, and diaspora communities. These encounters create a decentralized infrastructure of cultural contact.

This phenomenon has contributed to the emergence of gastrodiploacy, through which national cuisines are mobilized to communicate national identity and generate favorable perceptions among international publics (Suntikul, 2019). Cuisine consequently operates at the intersection of cultural diplomacy, tourism, place branding, agricultural production, international trade, and the creative economy.

Vietnam constitutes a particularly relevant case. Vietnamese cuisine combines substantial regional diversity with internationally recognizable dishes. Phở, bánh mì, Vietnamese coffee, bún chả, gỏi cuốn, bún bò Huế, mì Quảng, cao lầu, fish sauce, and an extensive street-food culture have created multiple points of international cultural recognition.

International institutional recognition has also expanded. The 2025 MICHELIN Guide for Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang included 181 establishments, comprising nine one-MICHELIN-star restaurants, two Green Star establishments, 63 Bib Gourmand restaurants, and 109 MICHELIN Selected establishments.

Tourism provides another important platform for the internationalization of Vietnamese cuisine. Vietnam received approximately 21.2 million international visitors in 2025, an increase of 20.4% compared with 2024. Total tourism revenue was estimated at approximately VND 1 quadrillion.

More importantly, the 2026 Global Soft Power Index reveals an intriguing disparity. Vietnam maintained the 52nd position among 193 countries, while its culinary reputation was considerably stronger. This divergence suggests that Vietnam possesses considerable culinary attraction but has not yet fully transformed this attraction into broader reputational and strategic value.

This article defines this condition as the culinary soft-power conversion gap. Rather than asking simply whether Vietnamese food is internationally popular, the study addresses a more consequential question: How can Vietnam convert global culinary attraction into sustainable cultural influence, nation-brand value, tourism competitiveness, and economic benefits?

The question has become particularly relevant following the adoption of Vietnam's External Cultural Strategy to 2030, with a vision to 2045, under Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg dated July 17, 2026. Accordingly, the study pursues three objectives: first, to conceptualize the mechanisms through which cuisine produces soft power; second, to assess Vietnam's current strengths and conversion constraints; and

third, to propose an integrated strategy for positioning Vietnamese cuisine within the global cultural economy.

Methodology

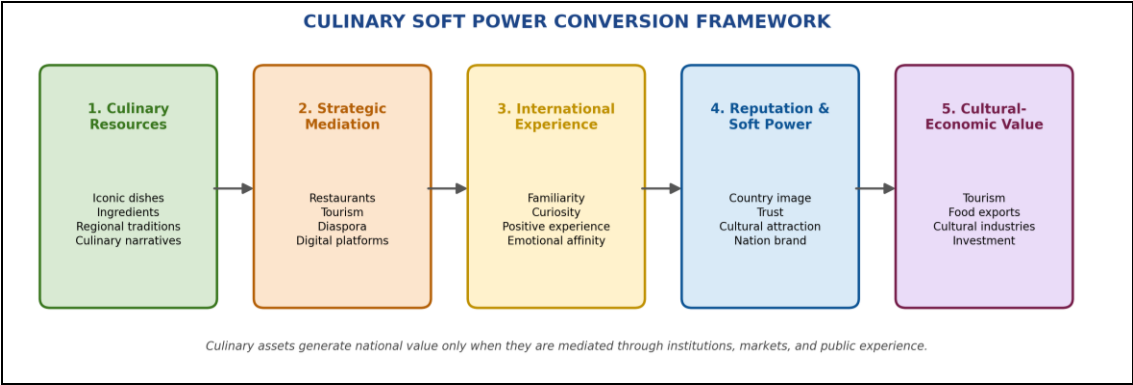
1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive and comparative research design. The analysis combines three methods: literature review, secondary-data analysis, and comparative policy analysis. The literature review covers soft power, gastrodiploacy, nation branding, culinary tourism, and the cultural economy. Secondary-data analysis draws on official tourism statistics, international soft-power indicators, and culinary recognition data. Comparative policy analysis examines selected practices from Thailand, Japan, and Singapore. Unlike survey-based studies, the present research does not generate simulated individual-level data. The analysis relies only on published and verifiable secondary evidence in order to maintain methodological transparency and publication credibility.

2. Analytical Framework

The study develops a five-stage Culinary Soft Power Conversion Framework: Culinary Resources → Strategic

Mediation → International Culinary Experience → National Reputation and Soft Power → Cultural-Economic Value. The first stage contains tangible and intangible culinary assets such as iconic dishes, ingredients, cooking techniques, regional traditions, artisans, street-food cultures, and culinary narratives. The second stage concerns mechanisms that communicate and distribute those assets internationally, including restaurants, tourism, cultural diplomacy, diaspora communities, food festivals, digital platforms, chefs, certification systems, and exports. The third stage captures international consumer experiences and the formation of familiarity, curiosity, trust, and emotional affinity. The fourth stage concerns the translation of these experiences into perceptions of Vietnam and the Vietnamese national brand. The final stage concerns economic conversion through tourism, restaurants, agricultural exports, food products, cultural industries, employment, and investment. This framework distinguishes culinary resources from culinary soft power. Cultural assets themselves are not equivalent to soft power; they must first be converted through institutions, communication channels, and market networks.



Source: Developed by the author based on Nye (2004), Sontikul (2019), and related literature.

Fig 1: Culinary Soft Power Conversion Framework

Results

1. Vietnam Possesses Strong Culinary Cultural Capital

The evidence suggests that Vietnam begins from a favorable position. Vietnamese cuisine possesses at least four comparative advantages. First, it has significant regional diversity. Northern, Central, Southern, Highland, coastal, and ethnic minority cuisines generate a broad culinary portfolio rather than dependence on one nationally standardized dish. Second, Vietnamese food is strongly embedded in everyday social life. Markets, sidewalks, small restaurants, home cooking, cafés, and neighborhood food spaces remain

central components of the culinary experience. This creates significant potential for experiential tourism. Third, many Vietnamese dishes possess relatively strong international accessibility. Rice, noodles, vegetables, herbs, grilled meats, soups, seafood, coffee, and fresh ingredients enable foreign consumers to encounter Vietnamese cuisine without requiring highly specialized culinary knowledge. Fourth, Vietnamese cuisine possesses significant narrative depth. Food can communicate geographical diversity, agricultural traditions, migration, historical exchange, local ecology, family life, and community identity. These characteristics provide Vietnam with what may be termed culinary cultural capital.

Table 1: Selected Indicators of Vietnam's Emerging Culinary Soft Power

Indicator	Recent evidence	Strategic significance
Overall Global Soft Power position	52/193, 2026	Moderate international soft-power position
“Food the world loves”	14th globally	Strong culinary comparative advantage
International tourist arrivals	21.2 million, 2025	Large potential audience for culinary experiences
MICHELIN-recognized establishments	181, 2025	Growing international culinary credibility
External cultural strategy	Decision 1306/QĐ-TTg, 2026	Stronger policy foundation

The table reveals an important pattern. Culinary recognition appears considerably stronger than Vietnam's overall soft-power positioning. This difference is central to the study.

The culinary soft-power conversion gap

1. From Food Recognition to Country Recognition

International familiarity with a dish does not necessarily imply equally strong familiarity with the country that produced it. A foreign consumer may regularly eat phở without acquiring broader knowledge about Vietnam's history, culture, society, tourism destinations, agricultural products, or contemporary development.

This produces a first conversion gap: Recognition of Vietnamese food ≠ recognition of Vietnam. The branding challenge is therefore to connect food with narratives about place, people, culture, and contemporary national identity.

2. From Culinary Popularity to Nation Branding

Successful nation branding requires recognizable associations. Japan has linked food with craftsmanship, seasonality, aesthetic simplicity, and tradition. Thailand has connected cuisine with hospitality, tourism, ingredients, restaurants, and its international food economy. Korea increasingly integrates food with the broader Korean Wave involving entertainment, beauty, digital culture, and tourism.

Vietnam has globally recognizable dishes, but its overarching culinary proposition remains less clearly institutionalized. The country possesses powerful individual brands—phở, bánh mì, coffee—but a comparatively weaker

umbrella culinary brand. This produces a second conversion gap: Strong dishes ≠ strong national culinary brand.

From culinary culture to global cultural economy

Cuisine is economically important because its value chain extends well beyond restaurant consumption. A successful culinary brand can generate demand for agricultural ingredients, beverages, packaged foods, sauces and condiments, restaurant franchises, culinary tourism, cooking classes, food festivals, digital content, cultural products, and hospitality services.

Vietnamese coffee provides a particularly illustrative example. A foreign consumer may initially encounter Vietnam through a cup of Vietnamese coffee. That experience can stimulate demand for Vietnamese beans, packaged coffee products, cafés, travel experiences, agricultural tourism, and knowledge about Vietnam.

The cultural and commercial value chains therefore reinforce one another. The mechanism can be represented as: Taste → Familiarity → Cultural curiosity → Positive national association → Tourism/consumption → Economic value → Reinforced national visibility.

This cyclical relationship differentiates culinary promotion from a genuine culinary cultural economy.

Comparative lessons for vietnam

Table 2: Comparative Culinary Soft-Power Models

Country	Dominant mechanism	Key lesson for Vietnam
Thailand	Overseas restaurants and culinary certification	Build international distribution infrastructure
Japan	Heritage, authenticity, and cultural values	Link food with heritage and national identity
Singapore	Hawker culture and place branding	Internationalize everyday food culture
South Korea	Integration with wider cultural industries	Connect cuisine with digital culture and creative industries
Vietnam	Strong organic culinary recognition	Develop mechanisms for strategic conversion

The comparative evidence suggests one fundamental principle: successful culinary soft power is not produced by food alone; it is produced by the ecosystem surrounding food.

Thailand provides the clearest lesson concerning distribution. Overseas restaurants can function simultaneously as businesses and decentralized cultural institutions. Japan demonstrates the importance of linking food to cultural values rather than merely individual recipes. Singapore demonstrates that ordinary, community-based food traditions can themselves become internationally recognized cultural assets.

Vietnam therefore does not need to imitate any one model. Instead, it should build a hybrid strategy reflecting its own distinctive culinary ecosystem.

Discussion

The principal finding of the study is that Vietnam faces not a deficit of culinary attractiveness, but a deficit of strategic conversion capacity. This distinction matters. The high international appeal of Vietnamese food suggests that the most difficult first stage—creating cultural attraction—has already been partially achieved. The remaining issue concerns the institutional channels that convert attraction into value.

The process may be represented as follows: Culinary attractiveness → International exposure → Positive experience → National association → Reputational capital → Tourism + trade + diplomacy + cultural industries.

Without the middle stages, culinary popularity remains largely decentralized and commercially fragmented. This explains why promoting several Vietnamese dishes at diplomatic events, cultural festivals, or tourism fairs—while valuable—does not by itself constitute a comprehensive gastrodiploacy strategy.

A more mature approach requires coordination between culture, foreign affairs, tourism, agriculture, commerce, local government, private businesses, chefs, and diaspora communities. The finding is particularly relevant to Vietnam's new External Cultural Strategy. Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg establishes a policy framework for strengthening Vietnamese cultural presence internationally through 2030 and toward 2045. Cuisine represents one of the most accessible domains through which this objective can be operationalized.

The contribution of this study therefore lies in shifting the analytical question from “Is Vietnamese food globally attractive?” to “How efficiently does Vietnam convert culinary attractiveness into national value?” This constitutes the central concept of the culinary soft-power conversion gap.

Policy implications

First, establish a coherent Vietnamese culinary brand architecture. Rather than searching for one single “national dish,” Vietnam should build an umbrella narrative connecting diversity, freshness, balance, heritage, locality, hospitality, and creativity. A possible conceptual message is: One culinary nation – many regional identities.

Second, develop a Vietnamese restaurant certification network abroad. A voluntary certification mechanism, similar in function, though not necessarily design, to Thailand's restaurant-branding strategy, could support internationally operating Vietnamese restaurants. Certification should emphasize authenticity, ingredients, cultural representation, food quality, and storytelling.

Third, integrate cuisine into destination development

Vietnam should move from presenting food as an accessory to tourism toward developing dedicated culinary destinations and routes. Potential clusters include Hanoi, Huế, Hội An–Da Nang, Ho Chi Minh City, the Mekong Delta, and the Central Highlands.

Fourth, connect culinary soft power with food exports

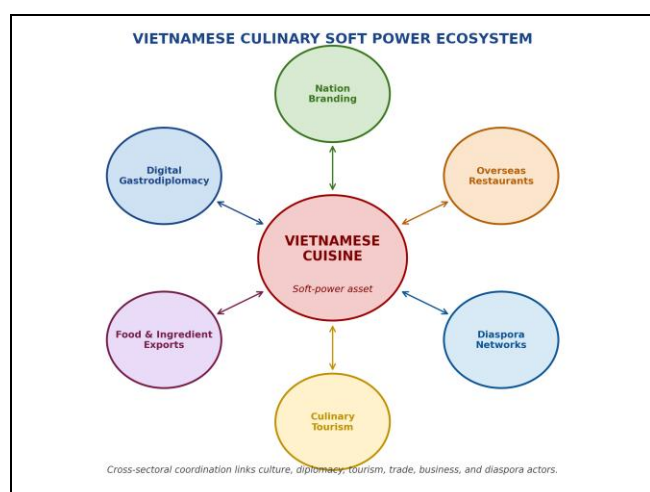
International recognition of Vietnamese dishes should increase demand for Vietnamese coffee, fish sauce, rice products, spices, noodles, fruit, specialty ingredients, and branded foods.

Fifth, mobilize the Vietnamese diaspora

Restaurants and culinary entrepreneurs abroad can become informal cultural ambassadors. They possess daily access to foreign publics that conventional diplomatic institutions cannot replicate.

Sixth, develop digital gastrodiplomacy

Food is particularly compatible with visual digital platforms. Instead of conventional promotional advertising, communication should tell stories about chefs, markets, farmers, ingredients, local communities, and regional identities.



Source: Author's synthesis.

Fig 2: Vietnamese Culinary Soft Power Ecosystem

Conclusion

Vietnamese cuisine has reached a stage at which international recognition is no longer its principal challenge. The strategic question is now one of conversion.

Vietnam possesses substantial culinary cultural capital, expanding international culinary recognition, a rapidly recovering tourism sector, and a stronger institutional foundation for external cultural policy. The 2026 Global Soft Power Index further indicates that the international attractiveness of Vietnamese cuisine considerably exceeds Vietnam's aggregate soft-power position.

The article conceptualizes this disparity as the culinary soft-power conversion gap. Closing this gap requires Vietnam to move beyond episodic food promotion and develop an integrated culinary ecosystem connecting culture, diplomacy, tourism, restaurants, agriculture, exports, diaspora networks, digital communication, and nation branding.

The central policy implication is straightforward: Vietnam should cease treating cuisine only as something to be promoted and begin treating it as an infrastructure of national cultural influence.

Under such an approach, phở is not merely a dish, bánh mì is not merely street food, and Vietnamese coffee is not merely an agricultural commodity. Together with thousands of regional dishes, restaurants, markets, chefs, farmers, entrepreneurs, and overseas Vietnamese communities, they constitute a distributed network through which the world encounters Vietnam.

The transition from culinary heritage to culinary soft power occurs when those encounters become persistent positive associations with the country. The transition from soft power to the global cultural economy occurs when those associations subsequently generate tourism, trade, cultural consumption, investment, and international influence. Vietnam possesses the cultural resources for both transitions. The next challenge is to build the institutions capable of completing them.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere appreciation to the University of Finance – Marketing, Vietnam, for supporting this research. The author also gratefully acknowledges scholars and institutions whose published studies, policy documents, and official statistics informed the analysis. Special thanks are extended to the anonymous reviewers and editorial board members for their constructive comments and suggestions that helped improve the quality of this manuscript.

References

1. Anholt S. Competitive identity: the new brand management for nations, cities and regions. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
2. Berg PO, Sevón G. Food-branding places—a sensory perspective. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. 2014;10:289-304. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pb.2014.29>
3. Cabral Ó, Lavrador L, Orduna P, Moreira R. Gastronomy as a diplomatic tool: a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*. 2024;38:101072. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijgfs.2024.101072>
4. Diem TA, Nguyen HT. Phở diplomacy: media narratives and the culinary identity of Vietnam in gastrodiplomacy. *Media Asia*. 2025. Advance online

- publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2025.2579750>
5. Government of Vietnam. Decision No. 1306/QĐ-TTg approving the External Cultural Strategy to 2030, with a vision to 2045. Prime Minister of Vietnam; 2026.
 6. Lee ST, Kim HS. Food fight: gastrodiploamacy and nation branding in Singapore's UNESCO bid to recognize hawker culture. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. 2021;17:205-217.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00166-3>
 7. Matwick K, Matwick K. Trump-Kim 2018 Singapore Summit and culinary diplomacy: the role of food and symbols in international relations. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*. 2022;18:65-76.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00188-x>
 8. Nye JS Jr. *Soft power: the means to success in world politics*. PublicAffairs; 2004.
 9. Pamment J. Articulating influence: toward a research agenda for interpreting the evaluation of soft power, public diplomacy and nation brands. *Public Relations Review*. 2014;40(1):50-59.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.11.019>
 10. Suntikul W. Gastrodiploamacy in tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*. 2019;22(9):1076-1094.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2017.1363723>