Performing Pad Thai: An Exploration of the Performance of Thai Cuisine as a Result of American Influence
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“Performing Pad Thai” examines the ways in which American political, economic, and cultural influence in Thailand has affected Thai cuisine. Through a historical overview, material critical contexts, oral history interviews, and a cookbook, this thesis argues that Pad Thai, Thailand’s national dish, constitutes performances of fabricated authenticity in Thai nation-building and American neocolonialism that deeply impact the experiences and identities of Thai Americans. This study establishes the historical emergence of the modern-day ‘friendship’ between Thailand and the United States within the process of nation building through the 20th century that led to Thailand becoming a food global power through gastrodipomacy by the 21st century. Considering gastrodipomacy’s material and cultural inception of Pad Thai in America, this paper then considers how performances of authenticity construct a perception of Thainess. Turning to the interpersonal impacts of these performances of authenticity on Thai Americans, this study includes oral history interviews with Thai restaurant owners that share how food plays an important role in Thai American identity formation and community knowledge. Finally, this paper includes a Thai American cookbook that re-centers Thai food’s communal meanings for Thai Americans, providing an alternative to orientalist narratives of Thai food that dominate American cookbooks and appetites.