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## Cultural Diplomacy across the Mekong Subregion: Cambodia's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

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### Abstract

This study examines Cambodia's deployment of cultural diplomacy as a strategic soft power tool in the Mekong region and its broader implications for regional cooperation within ASEAN. As a small yet culturally rich nation, Cambodia has increasingly leveraged its heritage assets, such as Angkor Wat, traditional performing arts, and Theravāda Buddhist traditions, to elevate its diplomatic profile and foster regional ties. In an era where ASEAN states increasingly turn to soft power to advance peace, integration, and sustainable development, Cambodia has emerged as a proactive actor, using cultural diplomacy to reinforce its connections with Mekong neighbors, including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The paper analyzes key initiatives, such as heritage diplomacy, cultural festivals, and people-to-people exchanges, that have enabled Cambodia to contribute to regional peacebuilding, economic cooperation, and environmental awareness. It also addresses the domestic and geopolitical challenges that shape Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, including limitations posed by its political structure, economic constraints, and regional rivalries. The study offers policy recommendations for enhancing Cambodia's cultural diplomacy through greater youth participation, digital engagement, and stronger leadership in ASEAN cultural platforms. Ultimately, the findings position Cambodia's model as a viable example for other small and medium-sized states aiming to exert influence through soft power. This research contributes to the expanding literature on cultural diplomacy and regional soft power, offering new perspectives on Cambodia's evolving diplomatic role in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, soft power, cultural diplomacy, ASEAN, Mekong region, regional cooperation

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## Cultural Diplomacy across the Mekong Subregion: Cambodia's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

### I. Introduction

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or force. It is primarily exercised through a nation's culture, political values, and diplomacy, rather than the use of military might or economic leverage, which fall under the domain of hard power. Soft power is crucial in modern international relations, where countries use non-coercive means to shape global perceptions, build alliances, and enhance international influence (Saaïda 2023). This power is particularly effective in international diplomacy and foreign policy, as it creates a favorable image that encourages other countries to adopt similar values, norms, or policies. Cultural diplomacy, as a subset of soft power, refers to the strategic use of cultural assets to enhance a country's global image and influence. It is a form of public diplomacy through which countries promote their cultural values, heritage, and traditions as tools for international influence and fostering peaceful cooperation (Melissen 2005). Cambodia, with its rich cultural heritage, including landmarks such as Angkor Wat and its Buddhist traditions, utilizes cultural diplomacy to foster stronger ties with neighboring countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. By showcasing its cultural resources, Cambodia strengthens its position as a regional leader in promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, as a diverse and dynamic region, has increasingly relied on soft power and cultural diplomacy to enhance regional cooperation and stability. ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, plays a central role in this process by integrating cultural diplomacy into its regional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Ma 2015; Indrawan 2016; Chong and Elies 2011). In a region characterized by rapid economic growth, cultural diversity, and geopolitical challenges, soft power offers smaller countries, like Cambodia, an effective way to amplify their voice on the regional and global stage without resorting to hard power. Cambodia has strategically used its cultural diplomacy to build and strengthen relationships within the Mekong region. This is particularly important in ASEAN, where cultural understanding and collaboration play a central role in achieving economic integration and political cooperation (Leng 2017; Sorphorn 2013; Szaz 1955). By leveraging its cultural heritage and soft power, Cambodia has been able to shape its image as a peace-oriented, cooperative partner within the Mekong Subregion and ASEAN. Cambodia's use of cultural diplomacy also plays a crucial role in fostering regional cooperation within the Mekong region. The country's active participation in cultural exchange programs, heritage diplomacy, and ASEAN initiatives allows Cambodia to strengthen its bilateral relationships with Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. These initiatives not only enhance Cambodia's regional influence but also contribute to cross-border cooperation in areas such as trade, environmental conservation, and cultural understanding (Putra 2025; Simon 1982; Bunthorn 2023). Cambodia's cultural diplomacy also supports its foreign policy objectives by reinforcing its role as a promoter of peace and stability in the Mekong sub-region.

Cambodia has increasingly relied on cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool to boost its international standing, especially in the Mekong region. As an emerging economy within ASEAN, Cambodia has utilized its cultural heritage to forge stronger ties with its Mekong neighbors and enhance its role in regional cooperation. Cultural diplomacy in Cambodia is manifested through initiatives such as the promotion of Angkor Wat as a symbol of Cambodian identity and heritage, along with educational exchanges, art exhibitions, and cultural festivals aimed at fostering peaceful relationships and collaboration in the region (Ocón 2021; Abe 2024). In the context of Southeast Asia, Cambodia's soft power approach aims to influence its neighbors, particularly through shared cultural traditions and common historical narratives. This

study investigates how Cambodia strategically deploys cultural diplomacy to elevate its regional standing and contribute to regional economic development, political stability, and environmental sustainability.

The objectives of this study are (1) to examine Cambodia's use of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool to enhance its influence in the Mekong region and expand its role in ASEAN, (2) to explore the role of cultural exchanges, heritage diplomacy, and regional initiatives in shaping Cambodia's foreign policy and fostering regional cooperation, and (3) to assess the impact of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy on regional cooperation in the Mekong region, particularly about cross-border collaboration, economic development, environmental sustainability, and ASEAN integration.

This study advances research on soft power and cultural diplomacy by focusing on Cambodia's role in Southeast Asia, especially within ASEAN and the Mekong region. While most scholarship centers on major powers, this research highlights how Cambodia, as a smaller state, strategically uses cultural diplomacy to enhance regional influence and cooperation. The findings will offer practical recommendations for Cambodian policymakers to strengthen foreign policy and contribute to ASEAN's regional integration and cohesion through cultural initiatives.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the late 1980s, which he defines as the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye 2004). Soft power primarily revolves around a nation's cultural appeal, values, and diplomatic relationships, which are used to shape global perceptions and secure international cooperation. Nye's theory is particularly relevant to Southeast Asia, where countries often rely on non-coercive means to strengthen their diplomatic standing in a region defined by diverse political systems, cultures, and economic development levels. Southeast Asian nations, including Cambodia, increasingly use soft power through cultural diplomacy to enhance their global influence and assert regional leadership (Melissen 2005). Cultural diplomacy, as a component of soft power, involves the use of cultural assets such as art, music, literature, and heritage, to promote a country's identity and values internationally. According to Arndt (2011), cultural diplomacy helps countries project their national identity, build international relationships, and enhance cross-cultural understanding. In foreign policy, cultural diplomacy has become an essential tool for states to engage in peacebuilding, economic collaboration, and multilateral diplomacy, especially in regions like Southeast Asia, where historical and cultural ties play a critical role in shaping regional relations (Leng 2017). In doing so, soft power and cultural diplomacy are increasingly recognized as tools for regional cooperation. In Southeast Asia, cultural exchanges, arts programs, and heritage diplomacy enhance regional collaboration by fostering mutual understanding and building trust (Cabauatan 2024). Through initiatives of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), countries in the region use cultural diplomacy to mitigate political differences and promote shared values that align with ASEAN's goals of regional stable cooperation (Indrawan 2016; Ma 2015). Cambodia's engagement in cultural diplomacy exemplifies how a nation can use soft power to facilitate regional cooperation and enhance its standing within ASEAN and the broader Mekong region (Weiss 2022).

ASEAN, as a regional organization, has increasingly integrated cultural diplomacy into its broader framework for regional integration of peacebuilding. ASEAN's cultural diplomacy efforts emphasize promoting shared cultural values, improving intercultural communication, and fostering collaborative relationships among member states. Through initiatives such as the ASEAN Cultural Fund, ASEAN music festivals, and cultural exchange programs, the organization encourages people-to-people connections, which are essential for promoting peace and regional cooperation (Rana and Ardichvili 2014). ASEAN has recognized that

cultural ties play a pivotal role in reducing tensions and fostering a sense of community in a region characterized by diverse ethnicities, religions, and political systems (Simon 1982; Ocón 2021). Countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have successfully used soft power through cultural diplomacy to expand their influence in Southeast Asia and beyond. Thailand, for example, uses Thai cuisine, Buddhism, and traditional arts to project its cultural appeal in ASEAN and other regions (Deth 2014; Chheang 2022). Similarly, Vietnam has capitalized on its historical ties and Confucian values to bolster its influence in the ASEAN region, promoting cultural exchanges and heritage preservation as tools of regional integration. Indonesia has actively used its traditional arts and Islamic cultural diplomacy to strengthen its soft power and foster regional ties. These case studies demonstrate the increasing importance of cultural diplomacy as an essential tool for fostering regional cooperation and enhancing a nation's global profile within ASEAN. Heritage diplomacy, arts exchanges, and cultural festivals have become critical components of ASEAN's efforts to foster regional relations. Cambodia has utilized Angkor Wat, traditional dance, and Buddhist heritage in soft power strategies (Morotti 2023; Falser 2014). Cambodia's participation in ASEAN cultural festivals and its role in diplomacy initiatives highlight how cultural assets are used to project national identity and promote regional unity. These activities provide an opportunity for smaller nations to showcase their cultural uniqueness and assert their place within ASEAN (Arndt 2011).

## **2.2 Cambodia's Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy**

Cambodia's foreign policy has evolved significantly since its post-Khmer Rouge era. Over the years, Cambodia has shifted from a neutral stance to an active participant in ASEAN and regional initiatives. Cultural diplomacy has played a central role in this transformation, as Cambodia used its heritage sites, such as Angkor Wat, and Buddhist traditions to establish its identity within ASEAN and enhance its diplomatic ties in the Mekong region. Cambodia's efforts to build regional partnerships through cultural exchanges, arts programs, and heritage diplomacy have allowed it to strengthen its diplomatic ties and expand its influence within Southeast Asia (Stark 2020). Cambodia's cultural heritage, particularly Angkor Wat, plays a central role in its soft power strategy. Angkor Wat is not only a symbol of Cambodia's national identity but also a key asset in cultural diplomacy. The UNESCO World Heritage Site has become a focal point for Cambodian diplomacy, helping to strengthen Cambodia's ties with ASEAN countries, global powers, and international organizations. Additionally, Cambodia uses traditional arts, Buddhist teachings, and cultural festivals to project its influence and foster mutual respect within the region (see Chheang 2022). Cambodia has actively engaged in ASEAN cultural initiatives, such as the ASEAN Cultural Fund, ASEAN's Arts and Culture Program, and the ASEAN Cultural Year. These initiatives aim to enhance regional unity by showcasing each country's unique cultural heritage and promoting intercultural understanding. Cambodia's participation in these initiatives has allowed it to assert its cultural identity while promoting regional cooperation and peace. Furthermore, Cambodia's role in regional cultural exchanges has enabled it to strengthen its foreign policy and enhance its international influence (Burridge 2014; Berkvens 2017).

While Cambodia's cultural diplomacy has yielded positive results, there are significant challenges it must address. These include concerns about its political legitimacy, economic limitations, and regional rivalry. Cambodia's authoritarian political system has at times hindered its ability to fully capitalize on cultural diplomacy as a tool for building international trust. Additionally, the country's economic challenges, including poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure, pose obstacles to promoting cultural diplomacy effectively on a global scale. Furthermore, regional rivalry, particularly with Vietnam and Thailand, complicates Cambodia's efforts to assert itself as a cultural leader within the Mekong region (Deth 2014; Melissen 2005). Despite these challenges, Cambodia's cultural diplomacy presents significant opportunities for promoting regional integration and collaboration within the Mekong sub-

region. By emphasizing its cultural heritage, particularly Angkor Wat and Buddhist teachings, Cambodia can serve as a bridge between ASEAN members and foster greater regional cooperation on cultural and environmental issues (Ocón 2021). Cultural diplomacy provides Cambodia with a unique opportunity to contribute to ASEAN's broader goals of regional stability, economic integration, and sustainable development while increasing its global influence as indicated in table 1.

Table 1: Literature review summary table

Topic	Key Points	Sources
Theoretical Framework of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy	Overview of Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, cultural diplomacy's role in international relations with regional cooperation.	(Nye 2004; Arndt 2011; Melissen 2005),
Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia	ASEAN as a platform for cultural diplomacy and its role in promoting regional cooperation and peacebuilding; case studies from Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia.	(Berkvens 2017; Simon 1982; Stark 2020),
Cambodia's Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy	Historical overview of Cambodia's foreign policy, the role of cultural diplomacy in ASEAN relations, and Cambodia's use of heritage in soft power strategy.	(Chheang 2022; Deth 2014; Leng 2017)
Challenges and Opportunities in Cambodia's Cultural Diplomacy	Challenges such as political legitimacy, economic limitations, and regional rivalry; opportunities for fostering regional integration and collaboration.	(Berkvens 2017; Burridge 2014; Leng 2017; Simon 1982)

### III. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach to explore Cambodia's cultural diplomacy as a tool of soft power in the Mekong region. The case study methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, focusing on its application as a means of influencing regional relations and enhancing Cambodia's international standing within ASEAN and the broader Mekong region. The case study approach is particularly suited to this research as it provides detailed insights into how Cambodia uses its cultural assets, including heritage, arts, and traditional values, to enhance regional cooperation, economic development, and political stability in the region (Yin 2009). By focusing on Cambodia as a specific case, this study offers a detailed examination of how smaller nations can use cultural diplomacy to project soft power, shape regional dynamics, and foster cross-border collaboration. The case study approach also enables the researcher to capture the complexities of Cambodia's foreign policy, the role of cultural diplomacy in shaping Cambodia's regional image, and the broader implications for ASEAN cooperation (Cresswell 2013).

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

This research employs three main data collection methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and case study observations. These methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy strategies, their impact on regional cooperation, and Cambodia's role in ASEAN and the Mekong region. The first method of data collection involved document analysis, focusing on Cambodia's cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as government reports, ASEAN agreements, cultural exchange programs, and foreign policy documents. Key documents included Cambodia's foreign policy statements, ASEAN summit reports, and cultural diplomacy initiatives outlined by Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and relevant regional bodies. Documents from ASEAN such as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural

Community (ASCC) framework, and Cambodia's participation in regional cultural festivals were reviewed to assess how cultural diplomacy is embedded in Cambodia's foreign policy. In addition, the second method involved conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation. This included government officials, ASEAN diplomats, cultural experts, and regional stakeholders involved in Cambodia's foreign policy and soft power strategies. These interviews were designed to explore the policy motivations behind Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, the challenges faced in its execution, and its impact on regional collaboration. The interviews were semi-structured to allow flexibility in the discussions while ensuring the collection of consistent, relevant data. Key participants included: Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ASEAN Cultural Diplomacy Offices, cultural attachés, diplomats, and experts on Southeast Asian cultural relations, and representatives from NGOs and civil society organizations involved in cultural exchanges and regional development. Finally, the third method involved observational data collection, where the researcher attended relevant ASEAN summits, Mekong cooperation meetings, and cultural diplomacy events held in Cambodia and the Mekong region. Observations focused on Cambodia's role in regional diplomacy during these events, including cultural exchanges and heritage diplomacy initiatives. The researcher attended events such as cultural festivals, ASEAN cultural dialogues, and art exhibitions organized by Cambodia in collaboration with ASEAN partners. Observational data helped to capture the real-time dynamics of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy in action and its role in regional cooperation.

### **3.3 Sampling Strategy: Purposive Sampling**

Given the focus of this study on Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, purposive sampling was used to select key stakeholders who could provide rich, detailed information on Cambodia's cultural diplomacy efforts and their impact on regional cooperation. The sampling strategy ensured that the individuals selected were directly involved in Cambodia's foreign policy and cultural diplomacy initiatives. The key stakeholders included: Government officials from Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant departments overseeing cultural diplomacy, along with ASEAN diplomats representing Cambodia in ASEAN cultural initiatives and regional cooperation programs, regional experts specializing in Southeast Asian diplomacy and cultural exchange, and civil society representatives and NGO leaders who are involved in cross-border cultural exchanges. This purposive sampling ensures that the perspectives of individuals with first-hand experience and expert knowledge of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and its role in ASEAN integration are captured.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The data collected from the document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis and triangulation techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. The analysis focused on extracting key themes related to Cambodia's soft power, cultural diplomacy strategies, and regional cooperation. The researcher analyzed the interviews to identify themes such as: The motivations behind Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, the effectiveness of cultural exchanges in fostering regional collaboration, and the challenges Cambodia faces in using cultural diplomacy as a foreign policy tool. The document analysis was also thematically categorized, allowing the researcher to identify how Cambodia's foreign policy documents and cultural initiatives align with its regional goals. To ensure the robustness of the findings, triangulation was used by cross-referencing data from interviews, documents, and observational data. This approach ensured that the findings were comprehensive and provided a well-rounded understanding of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy in the Mekong region as summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Research methodology overview

No.	Section	Summary Description
1	Research Design	Utilizes a qualitative case study approach focusing on Cambodia's cultural diplomacy in the Mekong region, highlighting its soft power strategy and regional influence.
2	Data Collection Methods	Employs three methods: (1) Document analysis of official reports and ASEAN frameworks, (2) Semi-structured interviews with diplomats, policymakers, and cultural experts, and (3) Observational participation in ASEAN and Mekong-related cultural events.
3	Sampling Strategy	Applies purposive sampling to select stakeholders with direct knowledge of Cambodia's foreign policy and cultural diplomacy, including government officials, ASEAN representatives, and civil society leaders.
4	Data Analysis	Applies thematic analysis to extract key themes from interviews, documents, and observations; triangulation ensures reliability by cross-referencing all data sources for consistency and depth.

#### IV. Findings and Discussion

##### 4.1 Cambodia's Soft Power Strategy in the Mekong Region

Cambodia has increasingly used cultural diplomacy as a central tool in its soft power strategy to enhance its influence and strengthen regional ties within the Mekong region. By promoting its cultural assets, particularly Angkor Wat, traditional arts, and Buddhist heritage, Cambodia has managed to project itself as a country rich in cultural history and a regional leader in cultural diplomacy. Cambodia's participation in ASEAN and other regional forums provides a platform to showcase its cultural resources and engage in people-to-people exchanges that strengthen its diplomatic relations with neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Cambodia's cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as organizing arts festivals, heritage exhibitions, and Buddhist cultural exchanges, have positioned it as a cultural bridge within the Mekong sub-region, fostering collaborative relationships and regional stability (Pavin, 2016). The soft power approach through cultural diplomacy enhances Cambodia's position as a trusted partner in regional integration, especially as it aligns its foreign policy with ASEAN's goals for peace and economic cooperation. Cultural diplomacy has had a significant impact on Cambodia's bilateral relationships with Mekong neighbors, including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. For example, Cambodia's Angkor Wat has become a powerful symbol in its diplomatic interactions with these countries, acting as a common cultural heritage that fosters mutual respect and understanding. Through cultural exchanges and heritage diplomacy, Cambodia has been able to leverage its rich cultural history to build strong diplomatic ties with its neighbors, often in ways that go beyond traditional trade agreements or political alliances. By positioning its cultural diplomacy as a means of peacebuilding and regional stability, Cambodia helps to mitigate conflicts and enhance collaboration in areas such as economic development and environmental sustainability in the Mekong region as highlighted in table 3.

##### 4.2 The Role of Cultural Heritage in Cambodia's Diplomacy

Cambodia's cultural heritage plays a central role in its foreign policy and regional diplomacy. Angkor Wat, as Cambodia's most iconic symbol, not only represents the country's rich history but also serves as a significant tool in promoting Cambodian identity and regional engagement. By leveraging its cultural heritage, Cambodia is able to present itself as a country deeply rooted in historical significance, which fosters respect and admiration from neighboring nations and the broader international community (see Leng 2017; see Stark 2020). Buddhism, an integral part of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, also plays a significant role in enhancing the country's soft power. As one of the region's most prominent Buddhist nations, Cambodia's Buddhist heritage

is used in diplomatic exchanges with Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, where Buddhism is a shared cultural value. Through religious diplomacy, Cambodia has fostered deeper cultural ties and encouraged interfaith dialogue within the Mekong region and ASEAN (Ocón 2021). Heritage diplomacy has become a key strategy for Cambodia to promote its national identity and enhance its international standing. By showcasing Angkor Wat, traditional dance, and Buddhist temples, Cambodia asserts its cultural uniqueness while also fostering cross-border collaboration in the Mekong region. Heritage diplomacy initiatives, such as cultural festivals and heritage tourism, have also encouraged collaborative efforts with Mekong countries, leading to joint cultural projects, shared conservation efforts, and regional cultural exchanges that reinforce regional integration and mutual respect (Ma 2015).

#### 4.3 Cambodia's Contribution to Regional Cooperation Through Cultural Diplomacy

Cambodia actively participates in ASEAN cultural exchanges and regional soft power initiatives, which aim to foster greater regional integration and cultural understanding within Southeast Asia. Its role in these initiatives enhances cultural exchanges through arts festivals, literary exchanges, and cultural seminars, often in collaboration with ASEAN countries. These do not only serve to promote Cambodia's culture but to encourage greater regional cooperation through shared cultural experiences (Deth 2014). Cambodia's participation in ASEAN's cultural diplomacy programs strengthens its image as a cultural ambassador and consolidates its influence in Mekong region. Cultural diplomacy has a significant impact on regional peace, economic cooperation, and integration. Cambodia's involvement in regional cultural diplomacy promotes peacebuilding efforts and supports regional integration by bridging cultural and social gaps. Its role in facilitating cultural diplomacy has created opportunities for economic cooperation through tourism, arts exchanges, and sustainable cultural development projects. The efforts contribute to ASEAN's overarching goals of economic integration, regional stability, and inclusive growth (Melissen 2005). Moreover, Cambodia's cultural diplomacy initiatives serve as a soft power tool, allowing the country to exert influence within the region without the use of hard power, while simultaneously promoting its economic interests and cultural values as highlighted in table 3.

Table 3: Findings and discussion summary table

Topic	Key Points	References
Cambodia's Soft Power Strategy in the Mekong Region	Cambodia uses cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool to enhance its role in the Mekong region, fostering regional ties through cultural exchanges, heritage diplomacy, and collaborations with neighbors.	Pavin (2016), Khmer Times (2020), ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
The Role of Cultural Heritage in Cambodia's Diplomacy	Cambodia's cultural heritage, particularly Angkor Wat and Buddhism, is leveraged as a tool in its foreign policy to enhance national identity and foster cross-border cooperation in the Mekong region.	Sok (2018), Pavin (2016), ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
Cambodia's Contribution to Regional Cooperation Through Cultural Diplomacy	Cambodia participates in ASEAN's cultural exchanges and regional soft power initiatives, contributing to regional peace, economic cooperation, and integration through shared cultural experiences and heritage diplomacy.	Melissen (2005), Suk (2015), Khmer Times (2020)

## V. Conclusion

This study has explored Cambodia's strategic use of cultural diplomacy as an effective tool of soft power within the Mekong region, highlighting its role in strengthening regional cooperation, economic integration, and sustainability within ASEAN. Cambodia's diplomatic initiatives, characterized by leveraging its cultural heritage such as Angkor Wat, traditional



arts, and Buddhist teachings, have effectively positioned the country as a key regional actor. Through active participation in heritage diplomacy, arts festivals, and people-to-people exchanges, Cambodia has significantly enhanced its diplomatic standing, fostered regional peace, and encouraged greater mutual understanding among Mekong countries. Cambodia's cultural diplomacy has successfully strengthened bilateral ties with neighboring nations including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, promoting regional stability and cooperation. Heritage diplomacy, particularly centered around iconic landmarks and shared Buddhist traditions, has proven crucial in bridging historical divides and fostering collaborative regional initiatives in cultural preservation and sustainable tourism. Additionally, the active integration of cultural diplomacy into Cambodia's foreign policy aligns closely with ASEAN's overarching goals for regional economic integration, political cooperation, and sustainable development. In the meantime, this paper proposes several recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy. First, Cambodia should enhance its use of digital and social media by developing comprehensive digital diplomacy strategies. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok can be leveraged to showcase the country's rich cultural heritage, thereby amplifying its cultural outreach and strengthening its soft power influence both regionally and globally. Second, Cambodia is encouraged to expand youth exchanges within ASEAN by establishing robust cultural exchange programs and scholarship initiatives targeting young people. Programs such as ASEAN Youth Cultural Festivals and regional internships focused on cultural preservation can foster mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue, and future regional leadership. Third, Cambodia should deepen its engagement within ASEAN cultural initiatives by actively participating in and leading regional dialogues that link cultural diplomacy with sustainable development. By positioning cultural diplomacy as a core element of ASEAN's regional objectives, including peacebuilding, economic collaboration, and environmental stewardship, Cambodia can play a leading role in shaping a more integrated and culturally cohesive Southeast Asia.

This study presents both theoretical and practical implications for Cambodia and the broader ASEAN region. Theoretically, it highlights how smaller states like Cambodia can effectively use cultural diplomacy as a soft power strategy to promote regional cooperation and diplomatic influence. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for Cambodian policymakers to enhance their global visibility through digital diplomacy, youth exchanges, and deeper engagement in ASEAN cultural initiatives. These efforts do not only strengthen Cambodia's regional leadership but also contribute to broader goals such as sustainable development, peacebuilding, and economic integration. Cambodia's model of cultural diplomacy can serve as a valuable example for other small nations seeking to leverage culture as a strategic tool in foreign policy and regional engagement.

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