

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF RANONG'S IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH PRODUCTS AS WELLNESS SOFT POWER FOR HIGH-POTENTIAL MARKETS

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ABSTRACT

Ranong Province possesses exceptional mineral water resources that include natural hot springs rich in therapeutic minerals such as calcium, sodium sulfate, magnesium, and silica. These natural assets provide significant health benefits, making the province well-positioned for wellness tourism development (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009; Smith & Puczkó, 2014). However, despite its comparative advantages, Ranong has not fully utilized its natural and cultural capital for sustainable economic growth. Poverty indicators remain high, and the province continues to rely heavily on traditional industries (NESDC, 2022).

This research investigates strategic pathways to develop Ranong's identity as a wellness tourism destination, innovate a community-based organic herbal mineral spray, and formulate soft-power-driven branding strategies aligned with national policies (Nye, 2004; Ministry of Culture, 2023). A qualitative approach—employing interviews, focus groups, and document analysis—was used to capture perspectives from stakeholders including community entrepreneurs, hot spring operators, and government agencies.

Findings reveal three essential components: (1) the need for systematic knowledge management of mineral spring identity; (2) high potential for health product innovation utilizing mineral water and indigenous herbs; and (3) strategic soft-power marketing that aligns with the government's OFOS and soft-power development framework (Global Wellness Institute, 2022; Kapferer, 2012). The results offer a sustainable development model leveraging local resources, community innovation, and cultural soft power to enhance regional and national competitiveness.

Keywords: Ranong, Mineral Water, Wellness Tourism, Soft Power, Community Innovation

INTRODUCTION

Ranong Province is distinguished by its abundant natural hot springs and premium-quality mineral water—unique for having no sulfur odor and being exceptionally rich in healing minerals such as calcium, sodium sulfate, magnesium, and silica. These mineral compositions have been widely documented for their therapeutic properties, contributing to improvements in musculoskeletal disorders, enhanced blood circulation, stress reduction, and better metabolic functions (Nasermoaddeli & Kagamimori, 2005; Bender et al., 2007). Compared with other mineral-water destinations globally, Ranong's water profile is notable not only for its purity but also for its chemical stability and naturally warm temperature, which make it suitable for a range of hydrotherapy and balneotherapy applications.

The presence of multiple hot spring systems—most prominently Raksawarin Hot Spring—provides a substantial foundation for wellness tourism rooted in natural resource advantages.

Beyond its mineral springs, Ranong possesses diverse ecological landscapes that further reinforce its potential as a wellness-based province. Its geography includes mountainous rainforest terrain, dense mangrove ecosystems, coastal beaches along the Andaman Sea, and biodiverse marine environments. Such ecological richness enables a wide range of wellness activities aligned with global wellness trends, including eco-therapy, forest bathing, hot spring therapy, coastal relaxation, and alternative healing practices. These natural features place Ranong among a small group of destinations in Southeast Asia with multidisciplinary wellness assets concentrated within a compact geographic area (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). When combined with the province's relatively low population density and tranquil environment, Ranong offers a unique sense of serenity, slow living, and restorative natural immersion—factors increasingly valued by international wellness travelers seeking relief from urban stress and digital overload.

Despite its high-value natural assets, Ranong faces persistent structural and economic limitations that have hindered the full utilization of its comparative advantages. According to the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC, 2022), the province ranks among Thailand's top ten poorest provinces, with per capita income significantly below national averages. The regional economy remains heavily dependent on traditional industries such as fisheries, rubber production, and small-scale agriculture—sectors that are vulnerable to climate fluctuations, global market volatility, and limited value-added capacity. These economic constraints reveal a pattern of underdevelopment in which the province's abundant natural capital has not yet been systematically transformed into diversified economic opportunities or high-value wellness industries. The disparity between resource potential and economic performance underscores the need for strategic intervention to unlock the province's latent strengths.

In recent years, Thailand has increasingly emphasized the concept of soft power as a national development strategy aimed at transforming cultural assets, natural resources, and local identities into globally competitive industries (Nye, 2004). Soft power not only enhances national image but also serves as an economic engine, enabling communities to participate in global markets through cultural appeal, creativity, and innovation. Thailand's Ministry of Culture (2023) outlines strategic guidelines that include elevating local products, storytelling, and cultural tourism within the broader creative economy framework. Within this context, Ranong holds significant potential. The province's distinctive mineral water identity, long-standing traditional healing knowledge, multicultural heritage, and pristine natural landscapes align closely with Thailand's soft power agenda.

The OFOS (One Family One Soft Power) initiative, launched as part of Thailand's soft-power policy directions, further reinforces the relevance of community-based production, cultural identity enhancement, and wellness-oriented product development for local economic transformation. OFOS encourages every household to develop high-value products rooted in local identity, creativity, and innovation—exactly the kind of environment that aligns with Ranong's natural resource strengths (Kotler et al., 2021). By integrating mineral-water-based wellness products with indigenous herbal knowledge and cultural narratives, Ranong's communities have the potential to create signature wellness goods capable of reaching both domestic and international markets.

Global wellness megatrends also amplify the timeliness of Ranong's development. The Global Wellness Institute (2022) identifies natural healing, thermal tourism, clean beauty, and traditional herbal-

based products as high-growth sectors in the global market. As consumers worldwide increasingly seek authentic, natural, and sustainable wellness experiences, destinations with high-quality mineral springs and herbal traditions are becoming more competitive. Countries such as Japan, Iceland, and South Korea have successfully leveraged their natural thermal resources as strategic soft-power tools, transforming local identity into global wellness brands. Ranong is well positioned to follow similar trajectories, particularly given its unique natural mineral characteristics, geographic accessibility, and potential for community-driven product innovation.

However, transforming Ranong into a globally recognized wellness and soft-power hub requires more than resource abundance. It necessitates a deliberate strategy combining identity construction, scientific validation, innovation capacity, and soft-power marketing. The province currently lacks unified branding, comprehensive knowledge management of mineral spring identity, and integrated product development pathways that connect local wisdom with global market demands. Without structured frameworks for identity enhancement and product innovation, the province's wellness assets risk remaining under-commercialized and fragmented. Addressing these gaps is critical for enabling communities to participate meaningfully in the creative economy and ensuring sustainable, inclusive growth.

Given these challenges and opportunities, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive model integrating wellness tourism development, mineral water innovation, indigenous herbal wisdom, and soft-power marketing strategies tailored specifically for Ranong Province. This research seeks to:

- (1) strengthen provincial identity through knowledge management and scientific-cultural integration;
- (2) promote community-based innovation through development of organic herbal mineral spray products;
- (3) advance soft-power-driven branding strategies aligned with Thailand's national policies and global wellness trends; and
- (4) contribute to long-term socio-economic development through sustainable, culturally grounded, and globally responsive wellness frameworks.

By addressing these areas, the study aspires to bridge the gap between Ranong's natural potential and its economic realities, positioning the province as a model for wellness-based soft power and community-centered creative economy development within Thailand and the broader ASEAN region.

Literature Review

Wellness Tourism

Wellness tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors within global tourism, defined as travel undertaken with the primary purpose of promoting physical, mental, or spiritual well-being (Smith & Puczkó, 2014). The sector has expanded rapidly due to rising consumer awareness of preventive health, stress management, longevity, and holistic wellness. According to the Global Wellness Institute (2022), the wellness tourism market exceeded USD 700 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow substantially as post-pandemic travelers increasingly seek restorative and nature-based experiences.

A significant portion of wellness tourism focuses on natural thermal environments, mineral waters, and traditional healing practices. Hot springs, in particular, have long served as therapeutic and recreational destinations worldwide—spanning Japan's onsen culture, Korea's jjimjilbang traditions, and various European balneotherapy centers (Erfurt-Cooper & Cooper, 2009). These sites attract travelers who value natural healing, stress relief, detoxification, and rejuvenation. Research consistently shows that destinations with unique mineral compositions, scenic natural surroundings, and cultural authenticity gain competitive advantage in the wellness tourism market.

For Ranong Province, its natural hot springs—featuring distinctive mineral-water qualities—align closely with global wellness tourism trends. Smith and Puczkó (2014) emphasize that successful wellness destinations must integrate environmental assets, cultural contexts, and therapeutic functions, all of which are present in Ranong. Furthermore, the rise of eco-wellness and sustainable travel has strengthened demand for destinations with minimal environmental disruptions, making Ranong's rainforest and coastal ecosystems valuable assets for positioning the province within emerging wellness market narratives.

Mineral Water and Therapeutic Benefits

Mineral water has historically been central to therapeutic practices across cultures. Balneotherapy, defined as the medical use of mineral-rich water for treatment, has been clinically recognized for its benefits on musculoskeletal conditions, circulatory function, and overall physiological relaxation (Nasermoaddeli & Kagamimori, 2005). Numerous studies confirm that mineral baths help alleviate chronic lower back pain, osteoarthritis symptoms, and rheumatic discomfort due to the presence of minerals such as magnesium, sulfate, and calcium (Bender et al., 2007). These therapeutic mechanisms arise from both chemical and thermal effects, enhancing blood flow, reducing inflammation, and promoting metabolic balance.

Silica—a key mineral found in Ranong's hot springs—also provides notable dermatological advantages. Research indicates that silica-rich water contributes to improved skin elasticity, hydration, and anti-aging effects by supporting collagen synthesis and acting as a natural emollient (Bender et al., 2007). This makes silica-containing mineral water highly relevant to wellness product innovation, particularly within the global clean-beauty and natural skincare market.

Comparative hydrological studies show that Ranong's hot springs are unique for their absence of strong sulfur odors, which increases user comfort and broadens product applicability. As Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) suggest, destinations with high-quality mineral properties combined with appealing sensory attributes tend to achieve stronger positioning in international wellness markets. Ranong's thermal composition therefore offers a strategic advantage for both tourism and product development.

Soft Power in National Development

Soft power, as conceptualized by Nye (2004), refers to a country's ability to influence global actors through cultural appeal, identity, and shared values rather than coercive force. In the context of contemporary economic development, soft power functions as an essential component of national branding, global visibility, and international economic engagement. Thailand has increasingly adopted soft power as a key development tool, recognizing the potential of cultural identity, creative industries, and local resources to generate global influence and economic value.

According to the Ministry of Culture (2023), Thailand's soft-power strategy emphasizes five main cultural pillars—Food, Film, Fashion, Fighting, Festival—all of which serve as global carriers of Thai identity. Wellness, although not yet an official category, is gaining prominence as an emerging soft-

power dimension due to Thailand's cultural heritage in traditional healing, herbal medicine, and hospitality. The wellness economy aligns closely with Thailand's broader creative economy strategy, which positions cultural products and community skills as central to national development.

For Ranong, soft power offers an opportunity to transform its natural mineral identity into a globally appealing wellness brand. Mineral water, indigenous herbal knowledge, and multicultural heritage provide the foundation for creating a "healing identity" that can resonate internationally. Kapferer's (2012) work on brand identity frameworks reinforces that destinations must articulate clear, authentic narratives to develop strong brand equity. By integrating natural wellness assets with cultural storytelling, Ranong can strengthen its contribution to Thailand's soft-power landscape.

Community-Based Innovation

Community-based innovation refers to the process of using local knowledge, indigenous resources, and community collaboration to create new products, services, or solutions that address local needs while generating economic value (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Mulgan, 2019). The concept is particularly relevant in rural and semi-rural regions, where cultural knowledge, natural resources, and shared traditions can be transformed into marketable innovations through participatory mechanisms.

In Thailand, indigenous herbs such as pandan (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*) and yanang (*Tiliacora triandra*) play an important role in traditional wellness practices. Scientific research supports their therapeutic properties, including antioxidant activity, cooling effects, and potential anti-inflammatory benefits (Wongchai & Smitinand, 2018). When combined with mineral-rich water, these herbs offer opportunities for high-value product development such as herbal mineral sprays, balms, aromatherapy oils, and spa treatments. Such products reflect the global demand for clean, natural, and culturally authentic wellness innovations.

Community innovation leverages local knowledge and transforms it into marketable products (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Mulgan, 2019). In Thailand, local herbs such as pandan and yanang are central to wellness traditions and have recognized therapeutic properties (Wongchai & Smitinand, 2018). This will bring benefits that will lead to balance in life and well-being and increase competitiveness in community tourism to be accepted by both Thai and foreign tourists, as well as spatial development on the part of the community to promote quality of life and fair returns to the people in the community to be sustainable. Janmuangthai, W. Sitthiwarongchai, C, Rodjam, C, Kongpan, Y. (2024).

Sustainable Development Framework

The United Nations' SDGs emphasize sustainable consumption, poverty reduction, and innovation for well-being (United Nations, 2015). Using natural resources responsibly—while deriving economic benefits—is key to regional development.

Sustainable development is a crucial consideration for wellness destinations reliant on natural resources. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasize the need for balancing economic growth with environmental protection, social equity, and long-term resource sustainability (United Nations, 2015). Hot spring and mineral-water destinations face risks of overuse, environmental degradation, and commercialization pressures if not managed responsibly.

Relevant SDGs include:

- SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being — promoting wellness and preventive healthcare.

- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth — supporting community-based economies through value-added wellness products.

- SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production — ensuring sustainable extraction and use of mineral water.

- SDG 15: Life on Land — protecting natural forests, watersheds, and biodiversity that support Ranong's hot spring ecosystems.

- SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals — encouraging collaborations among government, communities, and the private sector.

As wellness destinations grow globally, sustainability becomes a key competitive factor. Erfurt-Cooper and Cooper (2009) highlight that sustainable management of geothermal resources is essential for long-term viability. For Ranong, adopting SDG-aligned strategies ensures the protection of mineral springs, supports equitable community participation, and enhances the province's reputation as a responsible wellness destination.

OBJECTIVE

1. To develop knowledge management and identity enhancement models for Ranong's mineral springs.
2. To create an innovative organic herbal mineral spray product.
3. To develop soft-power-oriented branding and marketing strategies targeting high-potential markets.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed qualitative research to explore identity, product innovation, and strategic marketing dimensions.

Participants

Stakeholders included hot spring operators, herbal practitioners, tourism officers, entrepreneurs, and visitors.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews

Focus group discussions

Field observations

Policy and document review

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to categorize themes under identity, innovation, and soft power (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

RESULTS

1. Identity Development Stakeholders highlighted the need for cohesive branding of Ranong's mineral springs.
2. Product Innovation Combining mineral water with pandan and yanang herbs shows strong potential for wellness product development (Kanchanapoom & Putalun, 2019)
3. Soft-Power Marketing Strategies align with Thailand's OFOS initiative and emphasize global market outreach and digital branding (Kotler et al., 2021)

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

Ranong's natural resources and cultural knowledge provide strong opportunities for wellness tourism and soft-power-based product development. The study proposes an integrated framework to enhance local identity, promote innovation, and elevate Thailand's international soft-power index.

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