

Japan's Cultural Diplomacy: Influence on Thai Society¹

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Abstract

Thai culture has blended with many other cultures since historical times. Cultural transfer has occurred whenever there have been interactions between the Thai and other groups of people. Japan has had a long relationship with Thailand – approximately 600 years. However, Japan's cultural influence seriously began only during the time of King Rama V. As Japan has become even more successful, its influence could be seen clearer. This influence can be seen at the Thai consumer level. Japanese culture products, such as food and fashion, have been very popular among Thai consumers. This popularity has been extended to other products that sell Japaneseness, such as electronic devices and home appliances.

Another level of Japanese cultural influence that can be seen is in the form of the institutionalization of knowledge regarding Japan and the Japanese. This has been accomplished through Japanese cultural diplomacy. Nowadays, Thai and Japanese have a deeper understanding towards each other, which has become a strong basis for the relationship between Thailand and Japan.

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Introduction

It can be said that Thai culture is a blend of many cultures. Foreign culture has had an influence on Thai society since historical times. Such foreign cultures include Indian, Chinese and Western cultures. For example, Hinduism from India has played a significant role in Thai religious beliefs and is one of the basic foundations of Thai culture. Confucianism from China has regulated interaction between people in Thai society and is reflected in Thai people having strong family-ties. Through the Western education model, Thai women are now treated equal to men. The Western model of school was first set up in the 19th century for the children of nobles and later for the general people. The influence of Western style clothing can also be seen since the 19th century. These cultural exchanges occurred naturally through interaction between people and in the course of trade.

In the 20th century, other Asian cultural influences could be seen, particularly, Japanese culture. The acceptance of Japanese culture is now evidenced among Thai consumers. Japanese food has become popular in the Thai market, with Japanese food found in expensive hotels and restaurants and also available along the street at very cheap prices. Some Japanese ingredients are used to create more variety of food flavors, such as green tea and wasabi. Wasabi and green tea, as well as other Japanese food, are believed to be healthy food which contain high nutritional quality. The popularity has spilled over to other countries' food, such as, kimchi, kyoza and crepes, which are not Japanese by origin, but were introduced by Japanese, hence, branded and popular as Japanese food.

Japanese 'manga' (cartoons) and music seem to be the second most popular cultural products in the Thai market. Cartoons were the first Japanese culture that Thai children had access to and have continued to influence their lives – for example, Ikkyu San and Doraemon. Manga fan clubs have formed their own society to discuss and exchange information on their favorite characters. Cosplay is an example of their activities. Cosplay fans have a life style surrounded by Japanese cultural products. They watch Japanese movies and

television dramas, read comic books, listen to J-pop music, follow Japanese fashions and shop in Japanese department stores.

Japanese fashion is another cultural product that has been well-accepted among Thai consumers. Hair styles, dresses and make-up have been copied from Japanese magazines. Thai and Japanese shared the same complexion and body structure. There is little gap between Thai and Japanese in comparison to Western fashion.

Japanese fiction and pocket books translated into the Thai language have become popular. Translated short stories and books about life in Japan, travel in Japan and 'how to' books can be seen in general bookstores all over the country. The popularity of these products has led to more interest in Japan and Japanese high culture. This trend can be seen in the higher number of students learning the Japanese language.

According to Noriyuki Suzuki's research on Japanization in the globalized age of Thailand, the influence of Japanese cultural products has been clearer in urban areas since consuming Japanese products signifies a modernized life.³ Thai consumers have consumed images of Japaneseness, rather than Japanese culture itself. It is not only Japanese cultural products that have been popular, Thai consumers have preferred other products and ideas from Japan as well, such as, electronic appliances, home appliances, cars, machines and managerial systems.

The popularity of Japanese products can explain the acceptance and influence of new types of Japanese culture – technology. In the 1980s, technology became the main export of Japan. Competition from less developed countries pushed Japan to move forward. Southeast Asian technology was able to catch up with that of Japan in the line of consumer products with a cheaper cost of production. Japanese industry had to re-direct their production lines towards a new type of cultural commodity – cultural technology. Japanese technology products have spread to every culture. For example Sony Walkman plays both Japanese and other culture's songs. Technology then became the selling point of Japanese commodities that could not be easily

³ Suzuki, "Japanization in the Globalized Age of Thailand".

imitated. Cultural technology, such as Walkman, karaoke and video games, was the new tactic to counter challenges from other Asian countries. These products did not necessarily promote Japanese culture, but allowed consumers to develop their own culture. The outcome was that Japanese cultural technology had a considerable impact on the way of life of Thai consumers. Japanese industry became the leader in this type of technology and Thai consumers trusted Japanese brands. 'Made in Japan' meant remarkably more than a guarantee of the quality of products. Noriyuki Suzuki explained that the culture embedded in these commodities included higher social status, luxuries as an ideal of life, or constructing individualized world separated from the social and the reality.⁴

According to Anuch Apapirom, Japanese cultural influence on Thai society can be categorized into four aspects:⁵

1. *Political culture*: Japan has been praised as a successful democratic country. The idea of an Asian country with a stable democratic government and vibrant economy has inspired Thai people. Among some groups of people, the idea of Japan Inc. has been admired. Japan Inc. is the concept of the unity between the government and business sector. With the government's support, the business sector has moved forward and expanded into the global arena, creating the Japanese economic miracle. Thus, Japan could be a model for Thailand. Some groups of Thai people believed that for Thailand, although political parties are not strong, the unity among the government, bureaucrats and the business sector could be adopted. If Thais followed Japan's example, Thailand Inc. might bring prosperity to Thailand as well.

2. *Technological culture*: Japanese technology has been accepted as one of the most modernized and advance. Through the development of technology, Japan has been able to gain economic strength. Japanese direct investment in Thailand, such as cars, electronic and textile industries, established the system that tied the Thai industrial sector with Japanese technological development. This exchange of

⁴ Suzuki, "Japanization in the Globalized Age of Thailand", 10.

⁵ Anuch, "Japanese cultural influence in Thai society", 150.

technological culture through the Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan), and other institutions, has had deep influence on Thai science and technology development.

3. *Business culture*: Related to technological culture is Japanese business practices. The core of Japanese business practices is networking and cooperation within the network. This business culture was also adopted and has had an influence on Thai business culture. Attached to business culture is Japanese language and way of life. As the interaction between Thai and Japanese became closer through trade, tourism, and student exchange, local culture was transferred. Japanese local products could be sold and the Japanese government and business took this opportunity to promote the Japanese language. This was evidenced by that increasing number of Thai students learning the Japanese language. This was not only because of the admiration of Japanese culture, but was also because the Thai believe that learning Japanese would expand their job opportunities.

4. *Consumerism culture*: Beginning from the 1960s, Japanese industrial investment started to flood Thai market with products that were competitive to Western industrial products. The products, such as motorcycles, electric home appliances and electronic devices, which used to be available only among urban middle class people, became accessible among a wider circle of the society. Together with the Thai value of good appearance and being material possession oriented, consumerism was encouraged.

Later, Japanese popular culture began to be very popular, especially among teenagers. This raised concern among scholars whether Thai children would be affected by the Japanese value system expressed through cartoons, music, and other entertainment products. Now, there is evidence that this concern was an over-reaction because of the old fear of Japanese cultural domination. In fact, as Japanese products began to spread wider into the world market, Japanese industry began to take local culture into consideration. They began to develop products that appealed to international tastes. Therefore, the influence of Japanese products on Thai society, which was consumerism-oriented, was not different from that of other foreign products.

As mention above, the interest in cultural products also led to interest in the country of Japan and its high culture. The number of Thai students interested in learning Japanese increased along with the supply of Japanese language schools and teachers. Japanese language was taught in high schools, vocational schools and in universities all over the country. Any Thai citizens who wished to learn more about Japan could find courses in any private or public institution. Table 1 shows how the demand for learning Japanese resulted in an increase in the number of students along with the supply of Japanese language schools and teachers in response to the demand.

Table 1: The number of Japanese language institutions, teachers and students, 1975-1990.

Year	Teaching Institutions	Teachers	Students
1975	24	58	3,512
1981	28	128	9,217
1987	34	155	13,282
1990	63	274	11,869

Source: Compiled from Japan Foundation statistics.

In addition to the Japanese language, the number of Thai students interested in seeking Japanese government scholarships increased annually. As well, those who were willing to study in Japan on their own scholarship increased at an even higher rate.

Table 2: The number of Thai students categorized by scholarship, 1983-1990.

Year	Japanese scholarships	Private scholarship	Total
1983	256	163	418
1984	268	199	467
1985	293	307	600
1986	299	402	701
1987	337	399	736
1988	386	367	753
1989	418	413	831
1990	454	402	856
1991	448	450	898
1992	450	444	894
1993	480	512	992
1994	469	545	1,014
1995	480	530	1,010
1996	474	544	1,018
1997	457	535	992
1998	490	569	1,059
1999	508	599	1,107
2000	529	716	1,245
2001	556	855	1,411
2002	561	943	1,504
2003	622	1,019	1,641
2004	622	1,043	1,665
2005	611	1,123	1,734
2006	572	1,162	1,734

Source: Compiled from JASSO Statistics

The popularity of Japanese cultural products and technology has been one level of Japanese cultural influence on Thai society. At a deeper level, knowledge about Japan and the Japanese has been institutionalized. The Japanese Studies Center and the Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan) are examples of the institutionalization of knowledge regarding Japan and Japanese

culture. These two organizations were established by Japanese alumni and are supported by the Japanese government.

On November 15, 1983, the two governments exchanged notes regarding the Japanese Studies Center of the Institute of East Asian Studies, Thammasat University. The Japanese government provided a grant of 1,150 million yen (320 million baht) for the construction of the Japanese Studies Center at Rangsit Campus. The purposes of the project are:

1. To be a center for research and studies on Japan, both at the fundamental level and as best practices for Thailand.

2. To support and promote teaching and learning about Japan at every level, from below undergraduate level to higher than graduate level.

3. To support and promote scholars, students and knowledgeable people on Japanese studies to have opportunities to serve society.

4. To disseminate knowledge about Japan to academic institutions, governmental and non-governmental agencies in the form of publications.

5. To promote a better understanding between international and domestic academic institutions.

6. To be a center for the collection of Japan-related statistics for further research on Japanese studies.

The Japanese Studies Center is equipped with a large conference room with audio-visual equipment, two seminar rooms, a Japanese house, and a language laboratory. There is a library with 25,000 books donated from the government and Japanese universities. The Center also has a hostel with 30 double bedrooms, a restaurant, and laundry service.

The second phase was technical assistance through the Japan Foundation from 1986-1990. This grant was given to Thammasat University for Japanese studies affairs. During the second phase, experts were sent from Japan, both in the form of Japanese language professors and Japanese lecturers in other disciplines, to teach in different faculties. Thai librarians, staff, members of executive committees, and long-term visiting researchers were invited to Japan.

This amount of technical assistance provided scholarships that allowed the Institute of East Asian Studies to select competent applicants for final approval from the Japan Foundation. There was a budget for seminars, research, and publications. Allocation of this budget was through the cooperation between Thai government agencies and the Japan Foundation.

The Japanese Studies Center, Thammasat University has disseminated knowledge about Japan and Japanese culture in the area of social science and humanities and is a good example that explains the process of Japanese cultural dissemination in Thai society. The project was possible because of the cooperation of Japanese university alumni, both in Thailand and in Japan. Bunyat Suragarnwit, a lecturer in Thammasat University, was the spearhead of the alumni in Thailand. Paibun Pipatkul, who had connections with Liberal Democratic Party politicians in Japan, helped in lobbying for this grant aid project. When the construction was finished, the Japan Foundation supported the projects that disseminated Japanese culture; projects that were operated by Japanese university alumni.

Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan): TPA is another good example. The case of TPA involves two issues: 1) Japanese technology being accepted as the best and most suitable for Thai society; 2) a pool of human resources in science and technology field who institutionalized knowledge about Japanese technology in Thailand.

Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan) was established in 1973 by Japanese alumni and those who were trained in Japan under the Asia Bunka Kaikan (ABK) and the Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship. Mr. Sommai Huntrakul was the president of the establishing committee. The establishment was supported by the Japan-Thailand Economic Cooperation Society (JTEC). JTEC was established in 1972, and was led by Prof. Goichi Hozumi who was the founder of the ABK dormitory. He was consulted by the Japanese government during the time of anti-Japanese protests in Thailand. Under his philosophy that economic cooperation at the people level should be able to alleviate the anti-Japanese sentiment, the concept of establishment of the TPA was

commenced. JTEC continued to support the TPA financially and also provided new management and engineering technology to support TPA's activities, including:

- Calibration and Environment Testing Center.
- School of Language and Culture.
- Education, Training, Diagnosis and Enterprise Consultancy.
- Business and Technology Development.
- Corporate Communication and Marketing.
- Publishing House and Bookstore.

In 2007, the TPA established the Thai-Nichi Institute of Technology – an academic institution that provides education at the undergraduate level on technology, social sciences and humanities. The Institute's goals are along the same line as that of the TPA – to disseminate Japanese technology on management and engineering to Thai society.

Furthermore, Japanese studies centers have been established in many universities. Scholars in Japanese studies together have formed the Association of Japanese Studies in Thailand with the objective to be a place where Thai scholars can exchange ideas and knowledge about Japan, as well as to promote Japanese studies among Thai scholars. This association also has become the representative of Thai scholars in contacting with Association of Japanese Studies in other countries.

Institutionalization of Japanese Studies

The influence of Japanese culture can be divided into two levels. First, Japanese popular culture that has spread among the general population via Japanese products through the exchange of goods, services and people, and has become a common phenomena in any open society. Actors at this level of the relationship are the Japanese and Thai business sector and the people in general. Second, there has been a deeper understanding of Japanese culture among selected groups of Thai society. This level of understanding of Japanese culture has been deliberately nurtured by the Japanese government with the cooperation of the business sector.

It is evident that knowledge about Japan and Japanese culture has been institutionalized and disseminated systematically and has been beneficial to Thai society and the Thailand-Japan relationship. The pool of human resources has gradually and deliberately expanded and been empowered, mainly by the Japanese government. This process can be called ‘cultural diplomacy’.

Cultural diplomacy carried out by the government is the exchange of culture, both subjective and objective, among nations and their people for the purposes of mutual understanding. In this sense culture is used as a tool in one nation’s diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy, thus, serves or corresponds to the nation’s foreign policy. Culture is defined as a “complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁶ In short, culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns. Hence, exchange of people is the best cultural exchange.

Japanese cultural diplomacy commenced before WWII, although Thailand was not the main target. Japan’s focus was on Europe and China during that period because of the Mukden Incident in 1931 when Japan resigned from the League of Nations. In addition, most Southeast Asian nations were still under colonial rule at that time. However, cultural exchange between the Siam royal court and the Japanese government had occurred earlier, during the reign of King Chulalongkorn. The king supported many children of the noble families to go to study in Japan. He provided holy remains of the Lord Buddha found in India as a gift to the people of Japan in 1904. Furthermore, in an attempt to balance foreign influence, and with the cooperation of the Japanese government, the king hired many Japanese experts to work in Siam to support the development of the country, especially in agriculture and education. However, interaction between Japanese experts and the Thai fostered mutual understanding among people only in a small circle. Furthermore, such interaction was suspended after the reign of King Rama V.

⁶ O’Neil, “Human Culture : What is Culture?”.

After the 1932 revolution, Thailand shifted its attention from the West to Japan whose economic activities had begun to increase since a decade earlier. On the Japanese side, during the early 1930s, the Japanese Ambassador to Thailand had a significant role in persuading the Japanese business sector to take part in extending cultural ties between the two countries. The Japanese government itself was not keen on promoting the cultural relationship with Thailand until the end of the 1930s. In December 1937, the Cultural Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began its deliberation on cultural policy towards Thailand by conducting a survey on Western cultural activities in Thailand. From the survey, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was interested more in teaching Japanese language and disseminating Japanese culture. Finally, the Institute of Japan-Thai Culture was established in December 1938 on Na Pralan Road, financially supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan Siam Association, and donations from the Japanese embassy in Thailand. The Institute's activities included: 1) teaching Japanese language; 2) dissemination of information on Japan; 3) a Japanese library; 4) counseling on further education in Japan; and 5) other activities, such as, publishing books. The Japanese government scholarships for Thai students were started in 1942. All together, 13 Thai students were granted scholarships between 1942-1943. The program was terminated as WWII drew to a close as Japanese involvement in WWII caused mistrust among the general public.

On the Thai side, after the 1932 revolution, the Thai government increased the numbers of scholarship for Thai students to go to Japan. As there were more students interested in going to Japan on their own, a Japanese official suggested the Thai government appoint a representative to take care of all Thai students in Japan.

The Japanese government re-activated the scholarship program in 1954, especially for Southeast Asian students, with two types of scholarships: 1) research students and 2) under graduate students who wished to obtain a Master's or PhD degree in Japan, of which only 5-10 scholarships were granted annually because during that time a degree in science was not available for foreigners. The undergraduate student scholarship (10-15 scholarships annually) was for secondary school students who wished to obtain a Bachelor's degree in Japan.

These students must have had at least a lower level Japanese language proficiency.

These scholarships were non-binding, meaning that after graduation students could either apply for jobs in Japan or return to Thailand.

Table 3: Number of Thai Students under the Japanese scholarship program, 1954-1994.

Year	Number of Students	Year	Number of Students	Year	Number of Students
0	17	1967	13	1981	32
1954	3	1968	21	1982	42
1955	9	1969	15	1983	55
1956	4	1970	13	1984	58
1957	4	1971	17	1985	57
1958	9	1972	17	1986	56
1959	6	1973	23	1987	64
1960	7	1974	21	1988	73
1961	19	1975	17	1989	31
1962	19	1976	24	1990	68
1963	19	1977	24	1991	55
1964	23	1978	28	1992	71
1965	18	1979	19	1993	63
1966	21	1980	27	1994	52
Grand Total: 1,234					

Source: Record of Japanese government scholarship alumni 1954-1994.

The number of government scholarships increased continuously, both in types of scholarships and the number of scholarships, as Japan's economic growth expanded. By the end of the 1980s, there were scholarships for:

- Japanese Studies Students (1979).
- Teachers Training Students (1980).
- College of Technology Students (1982).
- Professional Training College Students (1982).

Table 4: Number of Students Classified by Occupation

Occupation	Number
Private Sector Employees	216
Academics	214
Government Officials / Public Enterprises	105
Business Owners	54
Housewives	13
Freelance	36
Others	165
Not Available	431
Grand Total	1,234

Source: Record of Japanese government scholarship alumni 1954-1994.

After graduation, a large number of Japanese university graduate worked in academic circles, as private sector employees and as government officials. This meant that they were in a position to disseminate Japanese technology, wisdom and positive attitudes to the society at large, including the younger generations.

In addition to the government scholarships, there were other training programs that gave participants a chance to stay in Japan for a certain period of time, such as the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), which was founded in 1932 as a non-profit foundation through an endowment granted by Emperor Showa. JSPS became a quasi-governmental organization in 1967 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, for the purpose of contributing to the advancement of science in all fields of the natural and social sciences and the humanities.

The purposes of the JSPS are to: 1) aid scientific research; 2) provide financial support for scientists; 3) encourage international cooperation in scientific fields; and 4) conduct programs relating to the promotion of science.⁷

In order to promote international exchange in scientific fields, JSPS arranges two exchange programs:

⁷ Kasagi, *Ideas and Politics in International Cultural Exchange*, 200.

General international exchange, including:

- Invitations to foreign scientists extended to overseas scientists on the application of their Japanese counterparts.
- Sponsoring of Japanese scientists on visits abroad.
- International joint research projects.
- Support for international scientific meetings.

Bilateral scientific exchange, including exchange of scientists, joint research, and holding of scientific workshops in cooperation with specific scientific organizations. Through these programs, JSPS has provided opportunities for human exchange, especially among people in science and technology.

The relationship between Thailand and Japan went through trying times in the early 1970s. Beginning from the end of the 1960s, anti-Japanese sentiment occurred all over the world. In Thailand, anti-Japanese protests erupted as a part of economic nationalism in 1972. For Japanese society, this situation was not an economic problem, rather it was because Japanese culture was unique and difficult for foreigners to understand. Japan needed to conduct cultural exchange to explain themselves to the world and the Japan Foundation was established for this purpose. The government consolidated cultural agencies and designated the Japan Foundation to be responsible of its cultural diplomacy. Its activities have included: 1) exchange of people; 2) promotion of Japanese Studies; 3) scholarships and grants; 4) arts exhibitions; and 5) library services.

In Thailand, the Japan Foundation Bangkok office has been assigned as one of its headquarters in Southeast Asia since 1974, which helps explain Thailand's position in Japan's diplomacy towards Southeast Asia. The Japan Foundation was established when there was already a small pool of human resources in Japanese studies. Therefore, the Japan Foundation's role was designed not only to disseminate Japanese culture itself, but also to support and institutionalize knowledge about Japan and Japanese culture in Thailand through this pool of human resources.

Not only the Japanese government, the private sector also took part in creating their own cultural exchange and spreading Japanese

technological knowledge. Japan Oversea Development Corporation (JODC) is a good example. JODC was established with support from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry with the objective to develop industries of other countries in order that Japanese companies could grow, as well as to promote Japanese SMEs to expand to the world market. JODC sends experts to business and private sector in under-developed countries in order to nurture economic and industries to facilitate expansion of Japanese enterprises in those countries.

Analysis and Conclusion

The influence of Japanese culture as seen widely in Thailand can be divided into two levels. One is at the level of consumers of Japanese products and cultural products. At a deeper level, the institutionalization of knowledge on Japan and Japanese culture by the Japanese government has created a pool of human resources and an environment that supports further studies on Japan.

Unlike other foreign cultural influence, Japanese cultural influence has not happen naturally as a consequence of the exchange of goods, services and human resources in general. Interaction between people, which led to cultural exchange, has happened through many channels. Admiration of Japan and the Japanese among the Thai has been due to its economic success and technological advances. Anti-Japanese sentiment occurred out of fear of the fast pace of this expansion of Japanese influence.

When the Japanese government seriously launched cultural diplomacy through the Japan Foundation, human exchange was believed to be the most effective channel of cultural exchange as scholars concluded that the most effective program was a long term scholarship program.⁸ It was important that people from different cultures share experience over an extended period in order to learn from each other. This group of people, who earlier had access to Japanese culture, further spread Japanese culture to the wider population.

⁸ Takahashi, "Japanese Students in Southeast Asia", 191.

Cultural diplomacy has had a reciprocating effect. In this case, the Japanese themselves gradually began to gain more access to Thai culture. Later, when people, both Thai and Japanese, began to understand the benefits of mutual understanding, they took part in creating their own cultural exchange program. The government could just step back and provided some assistance to the business sector. At the same time, the business sector, in cooperation with the Japan Foundation, provided joint programs of cultural exchange in various different forms. The snowball effect of cultural exchange began to grow. Some NGOs and local governments began to initiate their own small exchange projects. Therefore, as time went by, the Japanese government now plays only a supporting and regulating role in Japanese cultural diplomacy.

Cultural exchange has not been a one-way communication. The Thai people and government have taken a significant part in this cultural exchange and cultural diplomacy, although perhaps on a smaller scale. Cultural diplomacy created opportunities for both Japanese and Thai to learn of each other's culture. The expected outcome has been mutual understanding. Although Japanese cultural diplomacy was initiated in correspondence to its foreign policy, the result has been a peaceful relationship.

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