

Japanese in Bangkok



I've never felt more welcome in a foreign city than where I am at the moment – Bangkok! It has to do with Thai people's gorgeous smiles, but there is more to this city that makes me feel at home. It is Bangkok's amazing multilingual landscape, including the pervasiveness of Japanese! Before I left Sydney, I had a vague idea of Bangkok's linguistic diversity, and simply assumed that English would be the default foreign language of public signs [as Thom Huebner's research has shown](#). However, I never expected to find so many Japanese businesses, products and services that target Japanese people here. The signage of Bangkok is simply overflowing with Japanese!

It all started to make sense after I learned some interesting statistics. According to [Japan Tourism Marketing Co.](#), 886,783 Japanese tourists visited Thailand in 2010. In addition, there are more than 7,000 registered Japanese businesses and over 47,000 registered Japanese residents here (the largest Japanese population in Asia outside Japan). Japanese signs are pretty much everywhere, but they are particularly concentrated in three areas – Sukhumvit, where many Japanese expats live, Sala Daeng, one of the financial hubs with many Japanese companies' offices, and Pathumwan where two major Japanese department stores, [Isetan](#) and [Tokyu](#), are located.

Let me take you to some small streets off Sukhumvit Road in Phrom Phong. You are now walking past a large range of Japanese restaurants, Fuji Super, beauty salons, real estate agencies, Japanese flower shops, bakeries, cram schools, one-dollar shops, Shimako and Fuji hairdressers, second hand book stores, all predominantly catering for Japanese customers. Moving into Thaniya in Sala Daeng, you also find many Japanese restaurants, but what stands out in this financial area is the large number of hostess bars (different from Bangkok's famous go-go bars, and similar to those you find in Japan), whose clientele are [mainly Japanese business men, their clients from Japan and male tourists](#).



Having said that, none of these businesses have monolingual Japanese shop signs. Even though their main clientele is Japanese, their shop signs are usually multilingual in Japanese, English and Thai. Obviously English serves the purpose of creating an international image as well as attracting non-Japanese who are into Japanese products and services. By contrast, the inclusion of Thai in shop signs is a different story. Thailand has a 'sign tax', which is apparently quite complex even for business consultants here, but basically, you pay much less sign tax if your commercial signage includes Thai on top of other languages. As a result, many shop signs include Thai, even if the font size is relatively small. I assume that businesses such as the upmarket Japanese restaurant in the picture have a relatively small Thai clientele. At the same time, it seems the sign tax works well to maintain the presence of the Thai language in Bangkok's increasingly multilingual landscape, against the increasing prevalence of other languages, particularly English and Japanese.



It is not only in areas with many Japanese residents and tourists that you find Japanese signage and advertisements. [Just like Dubai](#), Bangkok has seen a 'Japan boom' in recent years, and as such, the Japanese language is widely used to boost the image of various local businesses and products for Thai consumers and foreign residents. A good example of this is snacks. There is an amazing range of snacks and sweets with Japanese brand names and catch phrases, even though many of them are not produced by Japanese companies. These snacks can be found practically everywhere, including small local markets where Japanese customers are unlikely to shop.

In contrast to static shop signage, Japanese signs printed on packages are always on the move: they are constantly moving from factories to trucks to shops to customers' hands to rubbish bins, powerfully integrating Japanese into Bangkok's public space as well as hundreds of thousands of workplaces and private homes in Bangkok.



**Research
Blogging**

Huebner, T. (2006). Bangkok's Linguistic Landscapes: Environmental Print, Codemixing and Language Change
International Journal of Multilingualism, 3 (1), 31-51 DOI: [10.1080/14790710608668384](https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668384)