

INFLUENCE OF CHANGING THAI SOCIETY ON THE JAPANESE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY IN BANGKOK¹

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บทคัดย่อ

เป็นที่สังเกตว่าจำนวนร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นในกรุงเทพฯ เพิ่มขึ้นอย่างรวดเร็วในทศวรรษที่ผ่านมา ตามข้อมูลจากองค์กรส่งเสริมการค้าต่างประเทศของญี่ปุ่น (JETRO) (2015: 8) มีร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นจำนวนทั้งหมด 2,126 ร้านในประเทศไทย และจำนวนสองในสามตั้งอยู่ในกรุงเทพฯ จำนวนดังกล่าวมีการเพิ่มขึ้น 20% ทุกๆ ปีนับตั้งแต่ปี 2007 คุณภาพนับว่าดีเยี่ยมเช่นเดียวกัน ทะซัทสึ (2008: 7) กล่าวว่า "เป็นอาหารญี่ปุ่นซึ่งคนญี่ปุ่นเห็นว่าอร่อยและราคาสมเหตุสมผลภายนอกประเทศญี่ปุ่น"

การขยายตัวของจำนวนร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นในกรุงเทพฯ มีเหตุผลอยู่เบื้องหลัง แต่งานศึกษาที่มีอยู่เกี่ยวกับอุตสาหกรรมร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นในประเทศไทยมักเน้นมุมมองทางด้านธุรกิจ ดังนั้น งานชิ้นนี้จึงมีจุดประสงค์ที่จะวิเคราะห์ปรากฏการณ์ดังกล่าว จากจุดยืนทางด้านสังคมศาสตร์ที่เกี่ยวข้องกับ

สังคมไทย การวิเคราะห์นี้ใช้สถิติการวิจัยสนาม และการสัมภาษณ์บุคคลที่เกี่ยวข้อง

ข้อสรุปของงานชิ้นนี้คือการขยายตัวของอุตสาหกรรมร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นมักเชื่อมโยงกับการเปลี่ยนแปลงของวิถีชีวิตและค่านิยมของคนกรุงเทพฯ อันเนื่องมาจากการเติบโตของเศรษฐกิจ และการพัฒนาของเมือง การเปิดสาขาของร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นในศูนย์การค้าขนาดใหญ่ทำให้คนรุ่นใหม่เห็นว่าร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นเป็นทางเลือกของอาหารในชีวิตประจำวันมากกว่าจะเป็นอาหารที่รับประทานในโอกาสพิเศษ อุตสาหกรรมร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นได้พัฒนาเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของสังคมกรุงเทพฯ อย่างต่อเนื่อง

Abstract

The number of Japanese restaurants in Bangkok has rapidly increased in the previous decade. According to the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) (2015:8), there are 2,126 Japanese restaurants in all of Thailand, and two-thirds of these are located in Bangkok. The number has been increasing by 20% every year since 2007. The quality is also outstanding. Tazatsu (2008:7) states: "There is Japanese food available which Japanese people feel tasty with the most reasonable price outside Japan".

There must be some reasons for this expansion, but most of the existing studies on the Japanese restaurant industry in Thailand focus only on the business

¹ อิทธิพลของการเปลี่ยนแปลงของสังคมไทยที่มีต่ออุตสาหกรรม

ร้านอาหารญี่ปุ่นในกรุงเทพมหานคร

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perspective. Therefore, this study aims to analyze this phenomenon from sociological points of view related to Thai society. The analysis is based on official statistics, field research and interviews with selected Thai people.

It was found that the expansion of the Japanese restaurant industry is highly connected to life style and value transformation of Bangkok people as a result of financial growth and urbanization. Wide integration of Japanese restaurant chains into large shopping malls has enabled Thai people to access Japanese restaurants as part of their daily lives. Moreover, this trend has created a new generation who recognize Japanese restaurants as choices for everyday food instead of ones for special occasions. The Japanese restaurant industry has been increasingly and deeply integrated into Bangkok society.

1. Introduction

It has been observed that Japanese food has been booming globally since the 2000s. According to the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture's website, the Organization to Promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad (JRO) was established in 2007 under the Ministry's official recognition. It seems to have been successful to a certain extent. According the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the number of Japanese restaurants overseas increased from 24,000 in 2006 to 55,000 in 2013. In Asia alone, it nearly tripled in the same period.

Iwama (2013) examined Japanese restaurants in China. He noted that Japanese restaurants are seen mainly in cities along the sea where there are many Japanese companies. Shanghai has 2,110 Japanese restaurants but the number of Japanese restaurants per person is not as high as in Taipei or Los Angeles. He discussed how Japanese restaurants are localized in China in order to be accepted by Chinese people. He concluded that Japanese food is still in the initial period, and it is still to be seen if it will be truly accepted in the longer term in Chinese society.

Japanese food has been widely accepted for a long time in North America. There are many studies about Japanese cuisine from a cultural perspective. Tanaka (2008) conducted interview research concerning the acceptance of Japanese cuisine in Toronto, Canada from the point of view of Japanese culinary culture and also connected to cosmopolitan lifestyles. Carrol (2011) states that sushi has become accepted in a different way from other ethnic cuisine. He planned subsequent research on the acceptance of *sushi*³ in the United States under the framework of globalization.

In Thailand Japanese food is also widely accepted. According to JETRO (2015:8), in 2015 there were 2,126 Japanese restaurants in all of Thailand, and two-thirds of these were located in Bangkok. The number has increased by 20% every year since 2007. The quality is also high. Tazatsu (2008:7) states: "There is

³ Vinegared rice mixed with vegetables or fish.

Japanese food available which Japanese people feel tasty with the most reasonable price outside Japan”. Indeed, any kind of Japanese food is available in Bangkok, both Japanese and Thai brands, from high-end to casual, from authentic to locally-influenced, and from sushi to *okonomiyaki*.⁴

Regarding Japanese cuisine in Thailand, JETRO has published a large number of surveys since the mid-2000s, such as *information related to the restaurant industry's expansion* in 2007, and *Survey of Japanese restaurants in Bangkok, Thailand- based on interviews with Japanese restaurants* in 2015. These surveys provide a great deal of useful data on Japanese restaurants, particularly for those who run businesses in the Japanese food industry. The Japanese Chamber of Commerce (JCC) has also published two articles. Tazatsu(2008) provided a summary of JETRO's survey, and Asai (2010) reported on the prospects of the Japanese restaurant market in Bangkok. Masuda (2010) describes a connection between the increasing number of Thai tourists to Japan and the popularity of Japanese food in Thailand. Kakumoto (2011:3) also emphasizes Japanese food's importance in promoting tourism to Japan, as it has a good reputation in other countries. All of these publications are written from a business standpoint, while studies about the Japanese restaurant industry in Thailand are rarely conducted from socio-cultural perspectives.

⁴ Japanese style unsweetened pancakes, mixed with vegetables, seafood or meat

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze the phenomenon of the Japanese restaurant industry's expansion in connection with changes in Thai society. I hypothesize that there has been significance change in Thai people's financial and cultural conditions and that these are an important factor for the expansion of the Japanese food industry in Bangkok.

The data used in this study is based on official statistics from the National Statistical Office of Thailand and my interviews with Thai people.

I selected 30 people living in Bangkok and interviewed them using prepared questions shown below in Table 1. These are questions I created in order to test my hypothesis. Interviews were done in English or Thai.

Tables 2 and 3 show respondents' characteristics categorized by age and occupation.

Changes in Thai society and the expansion of the Japanese food industry

I hypothesize that Thai society has changed in terms of financial conditions and lifestyles and that these changes have influenced the Japanese restaurant industry. The content that I will present is divided into 3 sections; 1) Financial growth of Thai people and expansion of the middle class in Bangkok, 2) Influence of Bangkok's financial advantages on spending on restaurants 3) The expansion of the Japanese restaurant industry in response to changes in Thai people's lifestyles.

Table 1 Questions for selected interviews

0. Please state your approximate age, occupation, living location in Bangkok and hometown
1. What is your favorite foreign food? (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Italian...)
2. Do you like Japanese food? Why?
3. What is your image of Japanese food?
4. What is your favorite Japanese dish? (e.g. sushi, tonkatsu,)
5. How often do you eat Japanese food? When?
6. In which restaurant do you eat Japanese food most frequently? Why? Is it in a shopping mall?
7. Since when have you liked Japanese food? Why?
8. Do you eat JP food in markets?
9. What is your favorite shopping mall? How often do you go to shopping malls?
10. Do TV programs influence your food selection?

Table 2 Respondents by age

Age	Number of respondents
Under 20	2
20-29	10
30-39	8
40-49	6
50-59	4

Table 3 Respondents by occupation

Occupation	Number of respondents
Office manager or upper, professor	8
Office worker, coffee shop owner	9
Guard, maid	6
Student	7

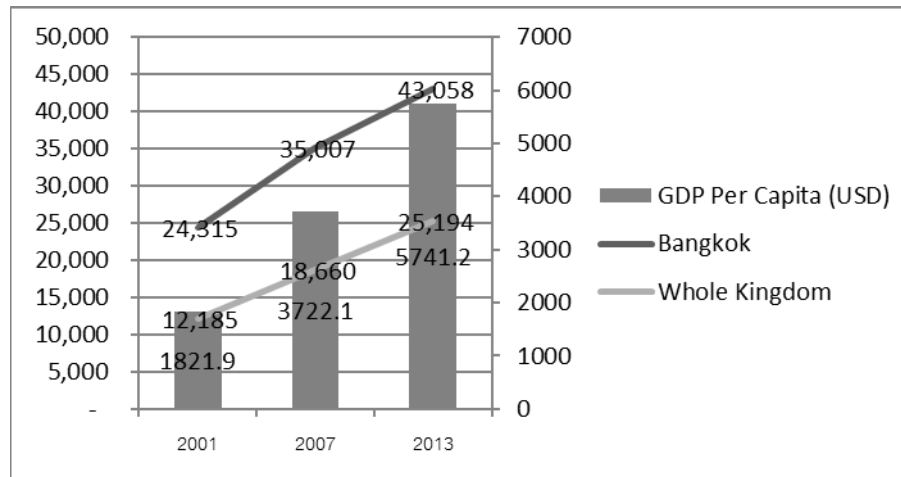


Figure 1 GDP Per capita and average household income: Whole kingdom and Bangkok
(Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, household socio economic survey)

Table 4 Socio-economic class in the whole kingdom and Bangkok
(Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand)

Socio-economic class	Whole Kingdom				2015 (Bangkok)
	1990	2000	2010	2015	
1. managers, senior officials and legislators	2%	3%	3%	4%	9%
2. Professionals	3%	4%	4%	6%	11%
3. Technicians and associate professionals			4%	5%	9%
4. Clerks	3%	4%	4%	4%	8%
5. Service workers and goods sellers	13%	18%	17%	20%	26%
White collar	20%	29%	33%	38%	64%
6. Skilled agricultural, forest, and fishery workers	63%	48%	38%	28%	1%
7. Craft and associate professionals			11%	12%	12%
8. Plant and machine controllers and assemblers	16%	21%	8%	10%	13%
9. Elementary occupations			11%	11%	10%
10. Workers not classifiable by occupation	1%	3%	0%	0%	1%
Blue collar	80%	71%	67%	62%	36%

2-1. Financial growth in Thailand and expansion of the middle class in Bangkok

JETRO (2014:13) shows that Thai people have an impression of Japanese food as “luxurious”. In fact, one bowl of *ramen*⁵ costs at least 70 baht at Hachiban Ramen, which Thai people consider the most reasonably-priced Japanese restaurant chain, while a bowl of Thai noodles is available for around 40-50 baht. In popular Japanese restaurant chains such as Fuji, Ootoya or Oishi, the cost of food ranges from 250 to 500 baht. Although Japanese food is more expensive than Thai food, Thai people are spending more money on Japanese food. This reflects an improvement in Thai people’s finances.

Figure 1 shows growth of GDP per capita of Thailand and average household monthly income (whole kingdom and Thailand). GDP per capita increased by 215% from 1,822 USD to 5,741 USD from 2001 to 2013. Accordingly, the average household monthly income in the whole kingdom increased dramatically 107% from 12,185 THB to 25,194 baht over the same period. When looking at the average household income in the Greater Bangkok area, it has increased 77% from 24,315 baht to 43,058 baht. Although the entire kingdom has benefitted from economic growth, greater Bangkok is notably richer than other regions.

Now that it has been established that overall income has increased throughout the kingdom and income levels in Bangkok

⁵ A kind of Japanese noodle, often characterized with unique soup by individual restaurants

exceed those for all other regions, can it be applied in all the socio-economic classes, or only in certain classes? In the discussion below, I will analyze financial growth by socio-economic class.

Table 4 shows transition of social structure by classes from 1990 to 2015 in the kingdom as a whole and in Bangkok, based on national statistics. Here I call those who work in agriculture, craft and factory workers (6-10 in table 4) “blue collar” and skilled white collar and people in the service industry (1-5 in table 4) “white collars”. A significant change in the whole kingdom is that the number of “white collar” workers has been continuously increasing. If looking at Bangkok, the trend is extreme. “White collar” workers are the majority of people, reaching 64%. They are also the people who mainly work in air-conditioned environments.

To summarize, as a result of economic growth, social changes are occurring in Bangkok. First, the average income has increased rapidly. Secondly, “white collar” workers, who work indoors, have become the majority of the Bangkok population.

2-2. Influence of Bangkok’s financial advantages on spending at restaurants

It was shown above that overall Thai people in Bangkok enjoy a relatively high living standard. Then the next question is how it influences their consumption activities related to the restaurant industry. Actually, a direct influence can be seen in the household expenditure survey conducted by the National Statistical Office of Thailand shown in Figure 2.

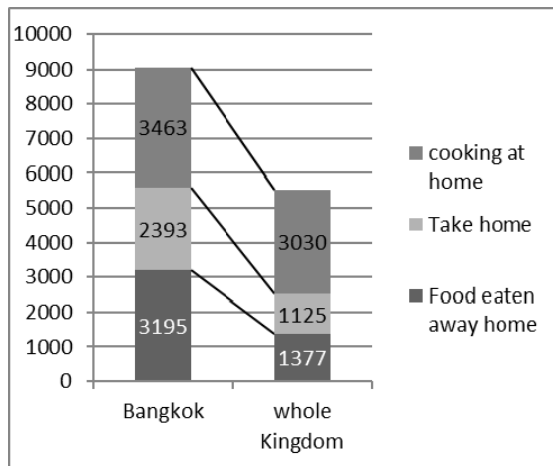


Figure 2 Expenditure on food: Bangkok and whole Kingdom 2013 (Source: National Statistical Office of Thailand, household socio economic survey)

Figure 2 shows average monthly household expenditures on food by categories in Bangkok and the whole country (cooking at home, take-home food, and food eaten away from home or eaten at restaurants). Total spending on food in Bangkok is over 9,000 baht per month, which is 60% more than the national average. However, households in Bangkok spend 3,463 baht on food cooked at home, which is only 14% more than the national average of 3,030 baht. Meanwhile, they spend 2,393 baht on take-away food (+123% of the national average) and 3,195 baht on food eaten away from home (+132% of the national average). This fact indicates that Bangkok people spend most of their higher incomes on cooked food (take-away food) or restaurant meals instead of purchasing more expensive materials for cooking themselves. A privileged financial

situation contributes to the prosperity of the restaurant industry in Bangkok.

The next discussion concerns the analysis of the situation by socio-economic classes. Figure 3 shows monthly household spending for food by categories and by socio-economic classes. Although professional workers (I call this skilled-white collar) spend the most, the percentage of food expense (=Engel's coefficient⁶) is significantly higher among clerical workers (I call unskilled-white collar) (27%) and general workers (I call blue collar) (34%). Although Engel's coefficient is supposed to be lower income classes, 34% is significantly high. The high Engel's score shows that this group tends to spend much more money on food compared to the national average. When breaking down the ratio of spending on restaurants, lower-white collar workers and blue collar workers in Bangkok spend 11-12% of their income, which is double the national average (5%).

To summarize, as shown above, financial advantage gives Bangkokians chances to enjoy eating at restaurants regardless of their social class. Moreover, a majority of Bangkokians spend significantly more on eating at restaurants than people in other provinces. This is likely caused by their urban circumstances, such as working away from home, accessibility to shopping malls, and availability of high quality restaurants. However, the cultural importance of food in Thailand must also explain why people spend a large part of their spare income on

⁶ Percentage of food expense vs entire household expense. The higher the standard of living is, the lower Engel's coefficient tends to be.

restaurants. Schmidt (2014) writes: “In Thailand, food forms a central part of any social occasion”. She states that sharing food and enjoying dinner together is important partially because of Thai people’s nature and partially because of Thai food’s serving style. Thus, it can be assumed that the financial advantage of Bangkok has contributed to the prosperity of the restaurant industry.

2-3. The expansion of the Japanese restaurant industry due to changes in Thai people’s lifestyles

So far I have shown that the economic condition of Thai people in Bangkok and the tendency to spend discretionary income on eating out contribute to the growth of food industry. In this section, I will show why the Japanese restaurant industry has obtained the most advantageous position in the industry. The discussion is mainly based on the result of my interviews with Thai people.

2-3-1. Leading Generation and Class of Japanese Food Boom

In my interview with Thai people, to the question of “Do you like Japanese food?” 26 out of 30 respondents (87%) answered “yes”, 5 answered “only limited dishes” and only one respondent answered “No”. Japanese cuisine is liked by the majority of Thai people. Then who is leading this boom?

Table 5 shows the answers to the question “Do you like Japanese food?” by age group. The number of respondents is small and thus may not be statistically significant, but the

trend can be seen that younger respondents tend to favor Japanese food.

There are comments from respondents that support this trend as follows:

“My young relatives all like Japanese food, so when we do voting for restaurants (for gathering) we always end up with Japanese food.” (T.U.⁷ a professor, 50s)

“(Before he had not eaten Japanese food) but I came to like Japanese food because my children brought Japanese food home from shopping malls”. (T.V. a security guard, 50s)

“My parents like Thai food. That is why I only ate Thai food when I was a child. (Recently he eats out with his parents mostly at Yayoi). These days they like Japanese food especially teriyaki chicken.” (T.F. an office worker, 30s)

“My parents did not like Japanese food so much. They preferred Chinese. Recently I have taken them to Japanese restaurants, always Fuji nearby. The reason is it is in a neighborhood shopping mall. My parents like grilled salmon, meat and salad.” (T.K. a student, 20s)

“Japanese food has been very familiar to me since I was a child. My family always had reunions in Japanese restaurants.” (T.B. an office worker, early 20s)

“I often go to Fuji with my family on weekends. It has been like that since I was a

⁷ T.A, T.B...stands for the names of my interviewees. The details of the interviewees are in the appendix.

child. My parents like grilled fish/meat and spicy salad at Fuji.” (T.L. a student, 10s)

It can be seen that many of the older respondents are taken to Japanese restaurants or were introduced to Japanese food by their children and gradually came to enjoy Japanese food. In the case of younger parents, their children eat Japanese food since the time they were very young.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the Thai people that are the most influential regarding Japanese food are currently in their 30s-40s. By their lead, parents have come to accept Japanese food and their children are familiar with Japanese food since childhood.

Then who is leading the boom in terms of socio-economic class? Table 6 shows the result of answers to the same question by respondents' occupation. Group 1 is office managers or higher positions, and professors. Group 2 is office workers. group 3 is guards and maids, who correspond to “blue collar workers” in table 4, and groups 1 and 2 correspond to “white collar workers”. Group 4 is students including high-school, undergraduate students and graduate students. Based on their family status, most of the respondents in group 4 are anticipated to be from families belonging to Groups 1 and 2.

It appears that group 3 like Japanese food less than the other groups. However, since the number of the interviewees was small, I cannot say with any certainty that the difference seen here is statistically significant. However, during the interviews, I was able to see the tendency that group 3 people tend to answer “Yes, I can eat it,”

which shows passive preference. On the other hand people from the other groups answered “Yes, I love it!” which shows proactive preference in many cases.

It can be inferred that the reason “blue collar class” people are less enthusiastic about Japanese food it is not only related to financial matters but also to lifestyle. Out of 8 respondents in class 3, 4 have no holidays and 2 have only one day off per week (unknown for one). Therefore, people from class 3 may not have time to access Japanese restaurants, which are mainly located in shopping malls.

“I do not go to restaurants. I work every day without a day off.” (T.R. 30s, guard leader, who likes Japanese food).

(“What is your favorite shopping mall? How often do you go to shopping malls?”) “No. I have to work every day including Sunday and Saturday. When I have some free time I relax at home reading the newspaper.” (T.T.30s, guard, who likes only limited Japanese food)

(To the same question above) “I do not go. I work every day except Saturday, from morning to evening. On Saturday I have to do household things and take care of my grandchild, so I have no time to go out.” (T.U.50s, maid, who does not like Japanese food)

“Only Sunday is a holiday. Every Sunday I have a family get-together at home.” (T.Q.50s, maid)

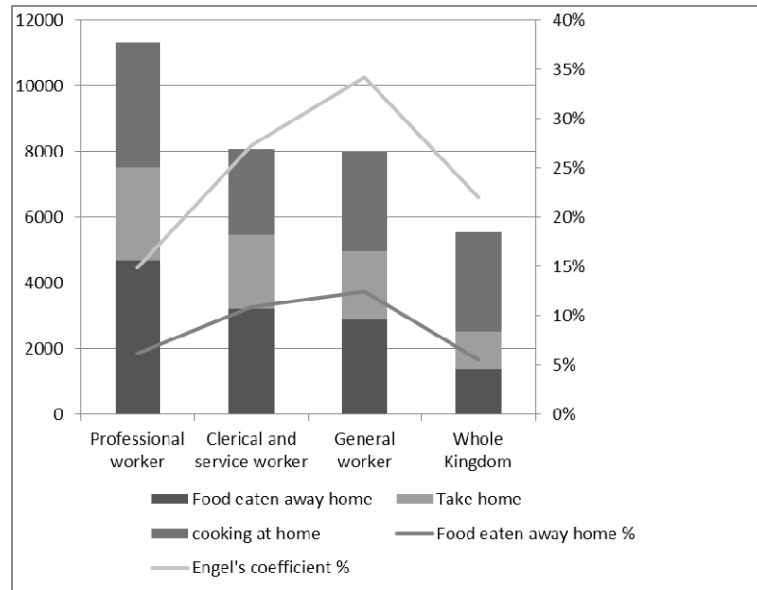


Figure 3 Spending on food by socio-economic class
(Source: chart based on data from the National Statistical Office of Thailand)

Table 5 Answers to the question “Do you like Japanese food?” by age group

Age group	10	20	30	40	50	Total
Yes	2	9	7	5	1	24
Limited		1	1	1	2	5
No					1	1
Total	2	10	8	6	4	30

Table 6 Answers to the question “Do you like Japanese food?” by occupation

Occupation	1	2	3	4	Total
yes	7	7	3	7	24
limited	1	2	2		5
No			1		1
Total	8	9	6	7	30

- 1 Office manager or above, professor
- 2 Office worker, shop owner
- 3 Guard, maid
- 4 Student

Since they have very limited free time, it seems many of them do not have time to go out to shopping malls where major Japanese restaurants are available. However, the boom in Japanese food in Bangkok is already influencing them as well as people in different socio-economic classes.

“I eat Japanese once a month. Whenever I want to eat it and have money. I want to eat more, but Japanese food is too expensive.” (T.I. 20s, a maid)

“My wife works in a Japanese restaurant on Sukhumvit Soi 11 as an assistant chef. She brings food back home at half price.” (T.R.30s, a guard leader)

What can be seen from these comments is that although some respondents do not proactively eat Japanese food, they are in circumstances that make Japanese food easily available (e.g as there are a large number of Japanese restaurants, the number of people who work in one is also considerably large, or there are so many

Japanese restaurants near their workplace that these restaurants draw their attention). Also the young generation seems to be impacted by boom in the same way as other classes.

To summarize, although white-collar workers are quite proactive in eating Japanese food, blue collar class are less so because they tend to be conservative and also have less free time to go to shopping malls. However, as the boom has spread broadly, circumstances enable them to access Japanese food. The young generation is as proactive as white-collar workers.

2-3-2. Reasons why Thai people like Japanese food

Thai people in Bangkok enjoy new lifestyles that include eating out at restaurants, as a result of rapid financial growth after 2000, the Japanese restaurant industry has benefited greatly. The trend is mainly led by middle age /young age people and the white

collar class. The reasons for choosing Japanese restaurants can be seen in their new lifestyles.

According to JETRO (2014:13), respondents answering the question why they like Japanese food, say that it is “tasty,” followed by “healthy” and “sophisticated, luxurious” (the top three answers).

Table 7 Reasons why the respondents like Japanese by JETRO Survey

Tasty	37.1%
Healthy	26.0%
Sophisticated, luxurious	12.6%
Fashionable	6.4%
He/she likes Japan	5.7%
Safe, hygienic	4.4%
Affordable	2.0%

Compared to the results in other cities, “healthy” and “sophisticated, luxurious” are chosen more frequently in Bangkok. For example, “healthy” is chosen by 26% of Thai people, while it is chosen by 15% in Ho Chi Minh City, 16.6% in Jakarta, 9.2% in Moscow. JETRO concluded that “Made-in-Japan food is high quality and high priced in terms of colors, shape, taste, safety and packaging; therefore, Thai people seem to have the same impression of Japanese dishes as those in other cities.” On the other hand, “familiar” “reasonable” are chosen less often than in other cities.

The next analysis is based on my interviews with Thai people. Below are the numbers of respondents who mentioned each word to talk about Japanese food. “Tasty” is excluded as most respondents mentioned it.

“Healthy”: 6 respondents out of 26 who like Japanese food (23%)

“Luxurious” : 2 respondents (8%)

“Value for price”: 3 respondents (12%)

“Unique, different”: 5 respondents (19 %)

“Good/fresh/high-quality raw ingredients”: 6 respondents (23%)

“Familiar”: 3 respondents (12%)

23% of respondents, mainly in their 40s-50s described Japanese food as healthy. It seems that they think it is “healthy” because of “good, fresh raw ingredients”. More than half of the respondents consider “Japanese food to be equal to fish, seafood” such as *sashimi*, *sushi* and grilled fish. They regard fish and seafood as main ingredients of Japanese food, and the ingredients are cooked simply without much oil, sugar or spices: this is a major impression of Japanese food among Thai people, and this matches their definition of “healthy”. This impression comes from a comparison with Thai food, which is considered to contain a lot of sugar, oil and carbohydrates.

“Japanese food is expensive but worth the money, so I pursue quality which meets the cost. Japanese food is healthy because it

mainly uses fresh fish/seafood. At the same time that is the reason for the high cost.” (40s, a senior manager).

“(What is your image of Japanese food?) Clean, fresh, healthy.” (40s, an office manager)

“(Why do you like Japanese food?) It is healthy in terms of ingredients and hygiene.” (T.S, 40s, an office manager)

There are only two who think Japanese food is “luxurious”. More respondents think Japanese food is expensive to some extent, but worth the cost.

“Expensive but worth it” (40s, an office worker)

“Good decoration” (30s, an office manager).

“High level. When the first hamburger arrived in Thailand, many Thais went to eat hamburgers because they felt they were high class. Now Japanese food is plentiful. It comes in a nice package which makes Japanese food look better.” (30s, an office worker)

“(Japanese food is) affordable” (20s, an office worker)

The majority of Thai people, regardless of class and age, do not think Japanese food is too luxurious or expensive. They think Japanese food is expensive to some extent (compared to Thai food); however, the price is a fair reflection of quality, decoration, and packaging. The fact that a wide price range for Japanese food available from *Yayoi* to high-end sushi restaurants enables people in each class to choose restaurants that suit

their income. Indeed, Japanese food is not too expensive for Thai people.

“Uniqueness” is also used to explain why Thai people like Japanese food.

“Interesting and amazing to eat raw fish and delicious” (30s, student)

“Raw ingredients are unique” (20s, student)

“Different taste. Good presentation. On weekdays I eat Thai food every day, so I want something different at weekends” (30s, office manager)

Only to be unique or different cannot be a reason. The majority of respondents note that they do not like western food because it is too different. When western food was introduced, people tried it but it did not become as popular as Japanese food nowadays. One of the reasons was it was fast food, but the main reason would be that the taste is too different from Thai food while Japanese food and Thai food share some similarities, e.g. in both, rice is the main source of carbohydrates.

“I or most Asian people do not like eating western food often because it is too oily, salty and we are not used to eating bread or potatoes” (20s, office worker)

“Before I used to like American food but now (I like) Japanese food. The reason why it was not Japanese in the past is that Japanese food was not so familiar in the past.” (40s, senior manager).

In conclusion, Japanese food became popular due to three reasons; its impression

as “healthy”, appropriately “luxurious” but affordable, and moderately “unique and different”. These impressions of Japanese food fit the demands of Thai people who are pursuing better, one-step further lifestyles. However, that the respondents raised “familiarity” as one of the reasons why they like Japanese food is noteworthy. All of those who mentioned this word were young respondents in their 10s to 20s. This indicates Japanese food is becoming ordinary rather than special food.

2-3-3. Influence of changing life styles of Bangkok Thais

In this section I will discuss the influence of urbanization as a background for the spread of Japanese food in Bangkok. Asai (2010: 25) states people’s tastes and preferences in Bangkok have been changing because their physical constitution has changed due to the spread of air-conditioning.

As shown in Table 4, people working in air-conditioning are now a majority of Bangkok people. Thai food developed to suit the hot climate. But now it makes sense that Thai people’s tastes have changed to suit a cooler climate.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of those who prefer mild food for staple meals. Among all age groups, the percentage of Bangkok people who prefer mild tastes is higher than the national average. It is most significant among the youngest respondents (15 to 24 years). On the other hand, the percentage of those who prefer spicy meals is 27% while the national average is 34%. In Bangkok especially, young people’s tastes have changed. Preference for spicy food, which is

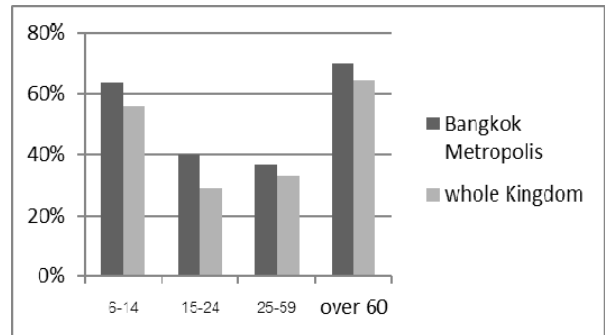


Figure 4 percentage of those who prefer mild food for staple meals by age in 2013
(Source: Food consumption behavior survey 2014, National Statistical Office of Thailand)

a defining feature of the national cuisine, has declined while milder tastes are preferred.

“Mild” here corresponds to the Thai word “*c̣ḥụt*”. Originally *c̣ḥụt* in reference to Thai dishes carried a negative connotation. Its meaning was closer to “tasteless”. This is because spicier, sweeter, and stronger tastes have been preferred culturally. During my survey, “*c̣ḥụt*” was a keyword to describe Japanese food. Six respondents used *c̣ḥụt* during the interview. (The interviews were done mainly in English, but when the people searched for a word such as “tasteless” I asked “Do you mean *c̣ḥụt*?” to confirm because the word “tasteless” is not a very common English word.) There were roughly two ways to use *c̣ḥụt*: one is that authentic Japanese food is too *c̣ḥụt*, so the respondents prefer localized Japanese food. Secondly, Japanese food is generally *c̣ḥụt* but this does not carry negative feelings.

“There are two kinds of Japanese food. One for Thais and the other for Japanese (on Sukhumvit). I only like the ones for Thais because the taste is adjusted for Thais. Real Japanese food on Sukhumvit is too tasteless (c    ).” (30s, office manager)

“Taste is less spicy and c    . c     means tasteless. When used to describe Thai food, it has a negative meaning but for Japanese it is neutral, because it is the uniqueness of Japanese food.” (20s, student)

The changing lifestyle of the people in Bangkok influences their taste preferences. They tend to prefer milder food than people in other regions. In terms of age, younger people are coming to prefer milder tastes than their elders. Moderately localized Japanese food matches this trend so this may be one reason for the growing popularity of Japanese food in Bangkok.

2-3-4. Accessibility advantage of Japanese restaurant chains

Moderately-priced chain restaurants, often connected to the increasing number of shopping malls in Bangkok, suit the urbanized lifestyle of urban Thais during the period of financial growth.

Traditionally Thai people put high value on family activities. Weekend dinner with family is a typical and important event for Thais. However, having a family dinner at a Japanese restaurant was a limited choice for a majority of the families until recently as Japanese food was relatively unfamiliar.

“On weekends when having dinner with family we used to go to Chinese restaurants. But recently it has become Japanese. Japanese food was not well-known in the past.” (T.A, 40s, senior manager)

Since the middle of the 2000s, as household incomes rose, new shopping malls were opened one after another. Symbolic of this is Central World. The Central Group took over World Trade Center and opened the newly renovated Central World in 2006. After that the Central Group accelerated launching/renewing shopping complexes. Visiting these shopping complexes became a typical way of spending weekends with family for emerging middle class people in Bangkok. Accordingly, eating lunch or dinner at restaurants in shopping malls followed. T.A. comments that she goes to dinner with her big family including teenage nephews and nieces every weekend. Normally her family chooses Thai or Japanese. Other respondents also talked about their dinner with family. T.C, an office manager in her 30s, takes her elderly parents to Fuji restaurant in the shopping mall nearby three times a month. T.F, an office worker in his 30s, meets his parents often at a Japanese restaurant in a convenient shopping mall.

There is a significant reason they choose Japanese restaurants for their family dinner. There are not many other foreign food restaurant chains with moderate price range in shopping malls.

T.K., a student in her 20s, says she and her family always get together at a Japanese restaurant because “good and affordable restaurants like Fuji are not available for

Chinese food” although her family love to eat Chinese food as well as Japanese food.

Table 8 shows the numbers of big chain restaurants in the 14 malls in Bangkok where I did field research. The malls include high-end to standard, located in the city center and in residential areas.

Table 8 Number of famous chain restaurants in the 14 malls (Source: my field research)

Japanese	FUJI	10
	YAYOI	6
	Ootoya	4
	Hachiban	10
	ZEN	7
	OISHI group	10
	Coco Ichibanya	5
Western	KFC	8
	Mcdonalds'	7
	Pizza company	7
	Sizzlar	6
Chinese	Seefah	3
Korean	Dak Galbi	2
	Bon Chon	3
	Sukishi	4

In terms of number, Western restaurants are second to Japanese restaurants. However, the majority are fast food restaurants. These fast food restaurants cannot be a major choice for family meals because they are “seen to be only for young students and low class people” (comment by T.B., an office worker in her 20s), which older people do not like.

Chinese restaurant chains in this budget range are few. The only major chain is Seefah. Also the number of shops is not as many as for Japanese or Western outlets. It is worth noting that recently Korean chain

restaurants have become more prominent and more popular.

A major finding here is that accessibility to Japanese chain restaurants fits the new lifestyle of middle class people, which is one major reason for the expansion of Japanese restaurants.

2-3-5. Influence of Tourism on the Japanese food industry

The rapid increase in the number of tours from Thailand to Japan should also be taken into account as a factor for the increasing passion for Japanese food. The number of tourists to Japan dropped after the earthquake in 2011, but after that it has increased rapidly. The number of Thai tourists to Japan increased from 260,000 in 2012 to 658,000 in 2014. The percentage of all international travelers has also increased accordingly (figure59). The Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) states that the reasons are the removal of tourist visa requirements for Thai nationals and the increased availability of low cost airlines flying to Japan.

It is hard to prove if the boom in tourism to Japan directly contributes to the Japanese restaurant industry in Bangkok. However, there are two points that can be discussed. First, those who visit Japan are satisfied with the food in Japan and try more Japanese food after returning home. Second is the influence of TV programs which promote trips to Japan.

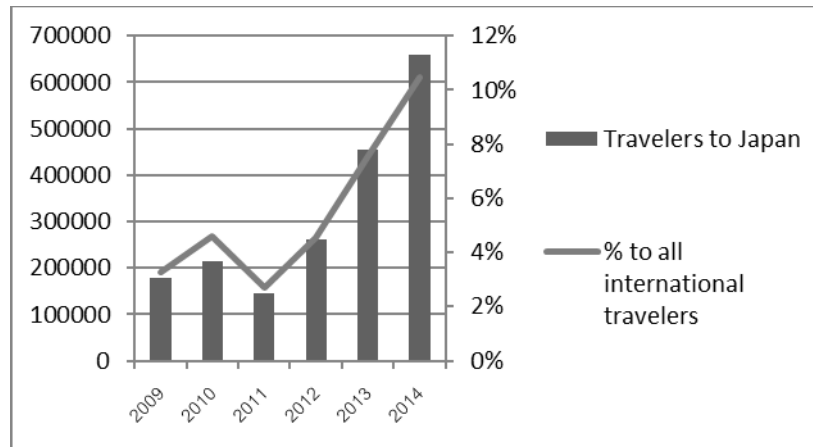


Figure 5 Booming tourism to Japan

(Source: chart based on data from the Japan National Tourism Organization and World Bank)

Kakumoto (2011:49) discovered 60.8% of Thai tourists expect to enjoy Japanese food before visiting Japan, and 75% of Thai tourists are satisfied with Japanese food after visiting. This means that once Thai people visit Japan, they are even more satisfied with original Japanese food than expected. For example, *Honmono Sushi*, a growing high-end *sushi* chain targets wealthy Thai people who have visited Japan multiple times. As such, those who traveled to Japan and were satisfied with food in Japan often create demand for the same quality or even better quality Japanese food when they are back in Thailand. This can be a trigger to improve the Japanese restaurant industry in Thailand.

In addition, multiple Thai respondents mentioned a TV program “*Say-hi*”, which introduces Japan and its food as a major factor. Respondent T.P., an office worker in her 30s, likes to watch “*Say-hi*”, and it makes her want to visit Japan or eat Japanese food. Respondent T.G., a student

in his 30s, says “Now that Thais no longer need a visa to visit Japan, I see a lot of travel programs every day. I try interesting food from restaurants like Fuji.”

It can be concluded that, booming tourism in Japan contributes to be the boom of the Japanese restaurant industry in Bangkok.

2. Conclusion

In this study, I tried to determine the influence of changes in Thai society on the Japanese restaurant industry in Bangkok. The analysis is based on my own interviews of Thai people in Bangkok, official statistics and other field research observations. First I show facts about the financial condition of Thai people, which contributes to the growth of Japanese food outlets in Thailand since the middle of the 2000s. After the economic growth since the 2000s, Thai people, especially Bangkokians, have more income in all the classes, and they tend to spend

more money on take-away food and restaurant meals. I also explain why they have increasingly come to choose Japanese food. First it was found that it is mainly white collar workers and younger Thais who lead the boom. The reasons why they choose Japanese food are that Japanese food is “healthy”, appropriately “luxurious” but affordable. It is also “unique and different” but not as different as western food. These characteristics of Japanese food respond to the demands of people who are pursuing better lives in a period of financial growth. Secondly, the prevalence of air-conditioned work environments has caused people to prefer food with milder tastes. The mild taste of Japanese food matches this new preference. Another advantage of Japanese food is accessibility. Japanese chain restaurants with standardized quality and reasonable price ranges are now major options in shopping malls, which are popular places for urban middle class Thai people to spend their weekend or free time. Last, booming tourism to Japan can be considered another factor in the growth of the Japanese restaurant industry. As more and more people travel to Japan, they bring back to their home country a familiarity with and preference for Japanese food, and those who cannot afford to travel to Japan were found to be influenced by the large number of Japanese travel programs on Thai television.

Japanese restaurants seem positioned to remain the second largest food industry following Thai food in Thailand, and Japanese food is already becoming more than just a short-term fad. In fact, it is now seen as one option for everyday dining rather than just a choice for a special occasion among younger Thais. Some young

respondents in their 10s to 20s answered that they like Japanese food because it is familiar, while older respondents tended to remark that they wanted to keep Japanese as exotic or for special occasions regardless of their passion level for Japanese food. One teenage interviewee who was not aware of Japanese food as being “foreign food”.

A major limitation of this research is the small number of interviewees due to limited resources and the social networks that I had available to me. Therefore, I expect future studies will be done based on systematic resources and processes with organizational support. Such research could serve as a new part of Japanese cultural studies in Thailand.

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Appendix

List of interviewees

Abbreviations	Date of interview	occupation	age range	sex
T.L	20-Jul	Chula student	10	M
T.Y	July	High school student	10	M
T.B	01-Jun	Researcher, Japanese company	20	F
T.D	17-Jun	MA Student	20	M
T.E	18-Jun	MA Student	20	M
T.I	10-Jul	Office maid	20	F
T.K	17-Jul	Chula student	20	F
T.M	24-Jul	Office worker	20	M
T.O	25-Jul	Undergraduate student	20	M
T.R	28-Jul	Office worker	20	F
T.S	28-Jul	Office worker	20	F
T.X	July	Coffee shop owner	20	M
T.C	08-Jun	Admin manager, Japanese company	30	F
T.F	20-Jun	Office staff	30	M
T.P	28-Jul	Office worker	30	F
T.Q	28-Jul	Office worker	30	F
T.T	28-Jul	Office manager	30	F
T.R	03-Aug	Guard supervisor	30	M
T.T	10-Aug	Guard	30	M
T.A	25-May	senior manager, western company	40	F
T.G	20-Jun	PhD Student, Part time	40	M
T.H	10-Jul	Accountant	40	F
T.J	10-Jul	office manager	40	F
T.N	24-Jul	Office worker	40	M
T.AA	30-Sep	Office General Manager	40	F
T.U	29-Jul	Professor	50	F
T.Q	03-Aug	office maid	50	F
T.S	04-Aug	Office director	50	F
T.U	10-Aug	Office maid	50	F
T.V	10-Aug	Guard	50	M