

Japanese Restaurants in Thailand: Dining in the Ambience of Japanese Culture

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Today, Japanese food is very popular in Thailand and various kinds of Japanese fare can be found, especially in Bangkok. Over the last decade, many Japanese fast food chains have entered the Thai market to boost the popularity of Japanese cuisine. Japanese cultural products such as manga, anime, music and fashion are also popular, and Japanese food constitutes part of the great interest in Japanese popular culture. This study attempts to trace the development of Japanese food businesses in Thailand and to view the background of the popularity—this will reveal the reasons for the growing consumption of Japanese cuisine.

1. Introduction

Japanese food has become very popular throughout the world over the last few decades. Although the degree of the popularity differs in each country, we can find some kinds of Japanese food restaurants in most major cities in the world; especially in more so-called advanced countries, the Japanese food available has many variations, from sushi bars to ramen noodle shops. An article in *AERA*, a weekly magazine by *Asahi Shimbun*, reported that many famous Japanese restaurant chains have started to enter the markets in Asian countries, due to the fact that the market in Japan has been shrinking in the last few decades due to deflation and a decreasing number in the younger population.¹ Thailand is, then, one of the Asian markets that Japanese companies are interested in making a breakthrough in. Thailand has the 7th largest Japanese population outside of Japan (47,251 Japanese residents as of October 1, 2010).² The *AERA* article also reported that Japanese restaurant chain brands such as *Yoshinoya*, *Ajisen*, *Mos Burger*, *Ootoya*, *Setagaya Ramen* and *CoCo Ichibanya* have entered the Thai market.³ Nowadays, in Bangkok, we can find many Japanese restaurants in shopping malls, hotels and on the streets/roadside, and we can see that the increasing popularity of Japanese food is sweeping the country.

Since the early 2000s, I have occasionally visited Bangkok and other cities in Thailand for fieldwork research, the reason being that I had become interested in studying the phenomenon of the consumption of Japanese pop culture by young people in Thailand. Almost every time I visited Thailand, I met many high school and university students and interviewed them about Japanese cultural products such as: J-Pop music, Japanese fashion, and manga/anime. These young students were informants for my research but, in many cases, we became friends and they taught me about Thai youth culture. Having be-

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¹ *AERA* (2012, March 13), "Gaishoku japan ajiawo seisu (Japanese food service industry suppresses Asia)." *Asahi Shimbunsha*.

² Japan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011 September). *Kaigai zairyū houjinsū chousa toukei—heisei 23 nen sokuhouban (Annual report of statistics on Japanese nationals overseas—as of October 1, 2010)*. Tokyo: MOFA.

³ *AERA*, *op. cit.*

come friends, then, we often went to Japanese restaurants together to enjoy dining together and for discussions. Furthermore, from November 2003 through March 2005, I had an opportunity to live in Bangkok as a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (an autonomous organization under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in Thailand). While I was living in Bangkok, I sometimes went to Japanese restaurants with the colleagues for lunch or dinner; and on weekends, I often went to Japanese restaurants with young friends after I had finished interviewing them about various kinds of Japanese cultural products.

“Why has Japanese food become so popular in Thailand? What has made Thai people, especially young people, frequent Japanese restaurants?” When I started to become acquainted with the young students, these questions arose in my mind. The increasing popularity of Japanese restaurants in Thailand made me interested in finding out the driving forces behind the rigorous consumption of Japanese food in Thailand. In this study, I would like to provide an overview of the Japanese restaurant business in Thailand and discuss its popularity. With the empirical data that I obtained from questionnaire research and field notes, English newspaper articles published in Thailand, and some other types of literature, I would also like to seek the underlying reasons for the popularity of Japanese restaurants in Thailand.

2. Brief History of Japanese Restaurants in Bangkok

2.1 Japanese Dishes for the Japanese in Bangkok

Even before World War II, many Japanese trading companies (called “*shousha*” in Japanese) had offices in Thailand, and many Japanese businessmen were working in Bangkok. In 1942, there were about 40 *shoushas* and about 3,500 Japanese citizens were living in Thailand when World War II ended.⁴ The Japanese restaurants in these early days were opened around this time in order to serve Japanese dishes to those Japanese residents who missed the flavor and the taste of Japanese dishes when they were assigned to work in Thailand.⁵

After Japan’s defeat in World War II in 1945, Japanese residents and Japanese restaurants disappeared from the scenery of Bangkok once Japanese residents were sent back to Japan. However around 1950, Thailand and Japan resumed economic relations, and many *shoushas* opened branch offices in Bangkok; *shoushas* and Japanese banks sent employees to work in Bangkok again. As the number of Japanese residents in Thailand increased, in 1953, the Japanese Association in Thailand was founded and 63 Japanese residents attended the inauguration ceremony. Following that, in 1954, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in Bangkok was founded, with initial members from 32 companies and the

⁴ Kawabe, Junko. (2005) ‘Bankoku nihonjin shoukou kaigisho 50nen no ayumi (The 50 years of Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok).’ *Tai keizai shakai no hanseiki to tomoni—Bankoku nihonjin shoukou kaigisho 50 nenshi (With the 50 years of Thai economic development—The history of 50 years of Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok)*. Bangkok: Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok. Pp. 285–358.

⁵ Bangkok Shuho. (2001) ‘Nihon no kokoro wo imani hikitsugu—washoku no shinise Hanaya (Inheriting the heart of Japan to the present—Japanese restaurant Hanaya)’, *Bangkok Shuho*. No.942. (January 26, 2001). Bangkok: Bangkok Shuho.

number of Japanese residents further increased thereafter.⁶

As the number of Japanese residents rose, the demand for high-quality Japanese food increased significantly and more Japanese restaurants opened in Bangkok. Today, there are many Japanese restaurants which were tailored to Japanese residents in Thailand, such as *Aoi*, *Shin Daikoku*, *Nippontei* and so on. These restaurants were founded and run by Japanese entrepreneurs who were also living in Thailand. In these restaurants, therefore, Japanese chefs aim to maintain the “authentic taste” and flavor of Japanese dishes. Also, there are high-class Japanese restaurants in some hotels in Bangkok, and middle and upper class Thais (as well as Japanese residents) visit such restaurants to taste “authentic” Japanese cuisine.

By the term “authentic taste” in this study, I refer to the taste that originated and is considered popular in Japan; either modern Japanese fast food or traditional Japanese cuisine, the “authentic taste” needs to be the same taste as the one that Japanese people are experiencing in Japan today. In other words, authentic Japanese cuisine means that the cuisine is accepted and eaten by the majority of the people who live all over Japan. As there are many different variations of Japanese food all over the world, it is difficult to define authentic Japanese food. But, in this study, it is important to distinguish between the Japanese food that is accepted as “Japanese” in Japan and localized Japanese food that has been created outside Japan (such as “fusion” or “mixed” Japanese cuisine). For convenience’s sake—to differentiate them in the following discussions therefore—I use the term “authentic taste” and “authentic Japanese food” to refer to the Japanese food which is eaten by the majority of people in Japan and which is popular in Japan.

2.2 Japanese Dishes for the Emerging Thai Middle Class

Japan’s investment boom toward Thailand from the late 1960s caused economic friction between the two countries and anti-Japan movements arose in Thailand in the early 1970s. As Japanese industrial products were flown into the Thai market, imports from Japan exceeded exports to Japan. Despite the economic situation in Thailand, after 16 years of operation in Bangkok, *Thai Daimaru Department Store* decided to move to a new building, and opened one of the biggest department stores in Bangkok on October 9, 1972. *Asahi Shimbun* reported that approximately 60% of the store’s merchandise was made in Japan at that time.⁷ Considering the situation, *Daimaru* was planning to reduce the number of products from Japan in the store and, about one month later, the manager of *Daimaru* asserted Japanese merchandise was only 25.2% of the total amount in the interview with the local English language newspaper *The Nation*.⁸ But the economic presence of Japan had become so prominent that Thai critics and economists expressed their concerns about Japan’s economic monopoly in Thailand. The eco-

⁶ Kawabe, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Asahi Shimbun*. (1972, October 10) ‘Tai daimaru 3 bai ni kakuchou (Thai Daimaru expands for threefold)’ p. 8.

⁸ *Asahi Shimbun*. (1972, November 16) ‘Tai no daimaru ne o ageru—gakusei ga fubai undou (Thai Daimaru gives up—Students’ movement—Anti-Japanese products movement)’ p 23.

conomic concerns induced university students' anti-Japan and anti-Japanese products movements in Bangkok, and *Daimaru* became a target of the harsh anti-Japanese products movement of Thailand.⁹

Although the presence of Japan in Thai society caused some problems in the 1970s and the 1980s, the advancement of the economic relations between the two countries also brought Japanese culture (as well as the Japanese people) to Thailand. Furthermore, as the economic development in Thailand has advanced, the disposable income of the Thai people has also increased. In the 1980s, many department stores, supermarkets and shopping malls were opened in Bangkok to meet the demands of middle class consumers, and some department stores in Japan were interested in entering the market. On October 4, 1980, *Daimaru* opened a second store in Bangkok,¹⁰ and on December 1, 1984, *Sogo Department Store* also launched a business in Bangkok. Furthermore, *Tokyu Department Store* and *Jusco Supermarket* also came to Bangkok the following year, in order to participate in the competition to win over Thai consumers.¹¹

It was through these department stores and supermarkets that Japanese food was brought to and introduced to Thailand. Many of the Japanese department stores had Japanese restaurants in the same building, so Thai consumers could taste Japanese dishes after they had been shopping. Also, the Japanese supermarkets in the department stores and independent supermarkets (like *Jusco*) sold Japanese food to the Thai people, which brought Japanese food to the dinner tables of Thai homes. The exposure to the flood of Japanese products, foods and people in the 1980s attracted more Thais to eat Japanese food.

In 1983, *Fuji Restaurant* started its business in Bangkok and it expanded its business along with the development of the Thai economy. Unlike the luxurious restaurants for Japanese residents, *Fuji* serves Japanese dishes for Thais at a reasonable price, so the majority of the customers who frequent the restaurant are Thais.¹² Another Japanese restaurant chain, which is well known by Thai consumers, is the *Oishi Group*. The group has started several brands of Japanese restaurant outlets since 1999 and the "all-you-can-eat" style of serving Japanese food increased the availability of the Japanese food, as many restaurants in Bangkok hotels started to provide buffet-style dining (serving Japanese foods); this has become a popular dining style in Bangkok today.¹³

2.3 Japanese Fast Food Restaurants in Thailand

On April 2, 1992, a Japanese *ramen* noodle restaurant opened at Silom Complex, a building and shopping center located in the business district of central Bangkok. *Ramen* is a Japanese dish of noo-

⁹ *Ibid.*; *Asahi Shimbun*. (1972, November 21) "Nihonhin no fubai hajimaru (Consumer boycott against Japanese products started)." p. 23.

¹⁰ *Asahi Shimbun*. (1980, September 20) 'Damaru ga tai ni 2 gouten (Daimaru opens the second store in Thailand).' p. 8.

¹¹ *Asahi Shimbun*. (1984, November 29) 'Ryūtsū sensou bankoku ni tobihi, nihon no hyakkaten zokuzoku—150 man nin no kyaku ubaiu (Competition of distribution industry in Bangkok—Japanese department stores flow into the market—compete over 1.5 million consumers).' p. 3.

¹² Personal communication with the Fuji Group, 2005 December 8.

¹³ Wattanasukchai, Sirinya. (2002, July 12) 'Highlight: The noodle ninjas', *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.



Figure 1 Gyoza-set in the menu of *Hachiban Ramen* in Thailand.
 Courtesy of Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd., Japan.

dles in broth, which is one of the most popular types of fast food in Japan. The name of the noodle restaurant was *Hachiban Ramen*. Originating at the first branch in Silom Complex, the *Hachiban Ramen* has expanded to 88 outlets (by the end of 2009) at the shopping malls in Thailand, and almost all young Thais in Bangkok know the name *Hachiban Ramen*. Weekdays after school ends, many secondary school students in school uniforms can be found in *Hachiban Ramen* outlets. Their favorite dishes are *ramen*, *gyoza* dumplings and cola (Figure 1). Sometimes they go to *Hachiban Ramen* with a group of friends; other times, they go there with their parents or other family members. As *Hachiban Ramen* is a fast food chain and not a traditional Japanese cuisine restaurant, anybody can go there wearing casual clothes and the prices also are not expensive.

When I first heard the name *Hachiban Ramen* around 2001 from secondary school students in Bangkok, I was not sure if *Hachiban Ramen* had come from Japan or if it had originated in Thailand. I wondered if the business might be owned only by Thais. Later on, I found out that *Hachiban Ramen* was a franchise *ramen* restaurant which started in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan, and which eventually expanded its business in Hokuriku and Chubu areas and grew to more than 160 outlets in Japan.¹⁴

Hachiban Ramen in Thailand is managed by Thai Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd.—a joint venture of Hachi-Ban Trading Co., Ltd. (a subsidiary of Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd.) and a local Thai company. The annual sales vol-

¹⁴ Goto, Shiro. (2008) 'Hachiban ramen no kaigai senryaku (Strategy of Hachiban Ramen for overseas business)', *Kan-nihonkai keizai jânaru (Japan sea rim economic journal)*. No.79. Toyama, Japan: Kan Nihonkai Keizai Kouryuu Sentâ. Pp. 8–13.

ume of Thai Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd. was more than two billion yen in 2006 and there were more than 7,700,000 customers.¹⁵ According to Goto Shiro, the President of Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd., *Hachiban Ramen* does not have to invest any effort into searching for new locations to open their outlets in Thailand, because shopping mall developers in Thailand will automatically draw the restaurant space for *Hachiban Ramen* into the blueprints when they design the shopping malls and will make direct offers to *Hachiban Ramen* to open outlets in the new shopping malls. Thus, *Hachiban Ramen* only needs to assess sales at the location and decide whether or not they will open a new outlet in the new shopping mall or not.¹⁶ This is, therefore, the reason why we find *Hachiban Ramen* restaurants in many shopping malls in Bangkok.

2.4 Growing Japanese Food Market in Thailand

Today, outlets of *Fuji*, *Oishi* and *Hachiban* can be found in many shopping malls and department stores in Bangkok, and also in many regions of Thailand. Since these restaurants serve Japanese dishes at a reasonable price and since many Thai people consider Japanese dishes to be healthy food,¹⁷ middle class Thai people have started to eat more Japanese dishes: and this has resulted in more entrepreneurs, both in Thailand and Japan, entering the market and opening up new Japanese restaurants in Thailand.

According to the Kasikorn Research Centre, there were more than 700 Japanese restaurant outlets in Thailand in 2008.¹⁸ Besides the *Fuji Group*, *Hachiban Ramen* and the *Oishi Group* restaurants, there are Japanese restaurant chains in Thailand, such as *Yayoi*, *Zen*, *Sukishi*, *Kobune* and so on. Some of these restaurants are subsidiaries of Thai companies that operate in other sectors of the food industry in Thailand. For instance, *Yayoi Restaurant* is a subsidiary of the MK Group, which has succeeded as a Thai Suki restaurant chain in Thailand. The MK Group has obtained the local franchise rights of *Yayoi Restaurant* from a Japanese company Plenus Co., Ltd for a timeframe of 10 years and it has been expanding the business rapidly.¹⁹

The growing Japanese food business in Thailand, which has been cultivated and nurtured by these companies, has attracted Japanese fast food chain companies. Thai companies that have lead the market have been interested in expanding their business by venturing business with Japanese companies. The mutual interest of both Thai and Japanese companies brought many Japanese fast food brands to Thailand in the 2000s.

¹⁵ Goto, Shiro. (2007) 'Hachiban rāmen jigyou no kaigai tenkai nituite (About the overseas business of Hachiban Ramen enterprise)', *Êjekku repôto (AJEC Report)*. Vol. 43. Kanazawa: Hokuriku AJEC (Around Japan sea Economic Exchange Conference in Hokuriku). Pp. 16–21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *The Nation*. (2009, June 3) 'Thais prefer Thai food, but Japanese fare rates second.' Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; Goto 2007, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Rungfapaisarn, Kwanchai. (2008, February 5) 'Jtepa paves way to fast expansion of Oishi', *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

¹⁹ *The Nation*. (2009, February 20) 'Expansion: MK to expand Yayoi chain here and abroad.' Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

3. Three Types of Japanese Restaurants in Bangkok

When asked what their favorite fare was when dining out, Thai consumers voted local cuisine as their first choice (57 per cent), while Japanese cuisine came in second (26 per cent), thanks to an increase in the number of local Japanese restaurants and a burgeoning health-conscious group of consumers. (*The Nation*)²⁰

Today, we can find many kinds of Japanese restaurants in Thailand, especially in Bangkok, such as sushi bar, authentic Japanese cuisine restaurants, *yakiniku* (Japanese barbecue) restaurants, *udon* and *soba* noodle shops, *ramen* noodle shops, *teppanyaki* (grilled Japanese steak) houses and so on. In January and February 2005, questionnaire forms were collected from 677 secondary school students in 7 schools in 5 regions of Thailand. In the research result, 66.6% of the students said they liked Japanese food. Moreover, in the two secondary schools which were located in the central part of Thailand, more than 80% of the students answered that they liked Japanese food.²¹

However, careful observation of Japanese restaurants in Thailand revealed that the Japanese food boom is not based on one large monolithic base, but on a mosaic of various kinds of Japanese restaurant businesses. When we look at the management and the ownership of these businesses, then, they can be grouped into three types; (1) Japanese Ownership-Type—Restaurants started up and owned by only Japanese who migrated to Thailand, (2) Thai Ownership-Type—Restaurants started and owned by only Thais, and (3) Mixed Ownership-Type—Restaurants started and owned by a partnership of Japanese and Thai people.

Type-1—Japanese Ownership-Type Japanese Restaurant

One of the oldest Japanese restaurants in Bangkok is *Hanaya*, which started its business before the World War II. Although the restaurant was closed when World War II ended and all Japanese residents had to leave the country, *Hanaya* is said to have re-opened the restaurant soon after the two countries resumed friendly diplomatic relations.²² Like in the case of *Hanaya*, the Japanese Ownership-Type restaurants were founded by those Japanese people who migrated to Thailand. These restaurants have been mainly for the Japanese people who reside in Bangkok. Since the targeted customers of these restaurants are Japanese, the dishes of Japanese Ownership-Type restaurants are usually authentic Japanese cuisine. *Hanaya* is still in business and there are many other restaurants which mainly target Japanese customers. Probably due to the limited numbers of Japanese residents in Bangkok, this type of restaurant tends to have only a few branches (or no branch) of the restaurant, and the prices of dishes

²⁰ The Nation. (2009, June 3), *op. cit.*

²¹ Toyoshima, Noboru. (2008) 'Longing for Japan: the consumption of Japanese cultural products in Thailand', *Sojourn*. Vol. 23 (2).

²² *Bangkok Shuho*. (2001, January 26) 'Nihon no kokoro wo imani hikitsugu—washoku no shinise Hanaya (Inheriting the heart of Japan to the present—Japanese restaurant Hanaya)' No. 942.



Figure 2 Fuji Restaurant at “Terminal 21” (Bangkok, Asok).
(February 4, 2012) Photo by author.

are quite expensive. Although middle and upper class Thais may also be important customers of these restaurants, the growth of the business seems to be limited, as it is not in the general scope of the mass market.

Another (and probably the most successful) restaurant of the Japanese Ownership-Type is *Fuji Restaurant*. Founded in 1983, *Fuji Restaurant* is one of the oldest Japanese restaurant chains in Thailand. Since 70% of the company stocks are held by the Japanese founder, Tanaka Kenji, and his family, some Thai media sources seem to erroneously think that *Fuji Restaurant* is a brand that has come from Japan. Although the *Fuji Group* has expanded its business to operate the Thai restaurant *Bangkok Kitchen*, a French restaurant and a hotel in Tokyo, their business started as a sushi restaurant *Sushi Tsukiji*, which was launched in 1970 in Bangkok. After the success of *Sushi Tsukiji*, Tanaka launched two high-class Japanese restaurants in Bangkok, under the brand name of *Shin Daikoku*, before *Fuji Restaurant* was even started.

Fuji Restaurant offers various kinds of set menus for the consumers, which are just like in restaurants in Japan. A typical set menu consists of a bowl of rice, a bowl of soup, some pickles, and an *okazu* which is a dish of meat or fish (or some other kind of dish) to eat with rice. This style of Japanese meal, which is the basis of a set menu in *Fuji Restaurant* (as well as in many eating places in Japan), is called

the “central rice meal,” in which rice is the centerpiece.²³ In *Fuji Restaurant*, “Salmon Tartar Sauce Set,” “Seafood Steak Set,” “*Katsu Toji* Set,” and other set menus are served in the “central rice meal” style. In many cases, therefore, customers can point to one menu item and he/she can get a complete meal. Besides the set menus, *Fuji Restaurant* also offers other types of Japanese dishes such as sushi, *udon* noodles, spaghetti *mentaï* sauce and even desserts.

The abundance of the Japanese dishes and the reasonable price at *Fuji Restaurant* make it easier for a group of friends or families to visit there and dine together. On weekends, we can find many groups of young Thais in *Fuji Restaurant*. Over the past several years, I have had meals at *Fuji Restaurant* with young Thai friends in Bangkok, and I have observed how they ate meals there. Some students order one dish and a bowl of rice from the à la carte menu, while other students order a large set menu and share it with their friends. They seemed to enjoy talking with friends who were also Japanophiles during the time they spent at *Fuji Restaurant*. *Fuji Restaurant* is a casual meeting place for young Thais who like Japan and Japanese cultural products, as well as enjoying an eating place with Japanese fare (Figure 2).

Type 2—Thai Ownership-Type Japanese Restaurant

As the presence of Japan increased in Bangkok in terms of the number/variety of Japanese people and Japanese cultural products, Thai entrepreneurs have also started Japanese food businesses. The target customers of Thai Ownership-Type restaurants are, therefore, Thais in the mass market. The Japanese fare at these restaurants is often Thai-style Japanese food, which tends to deviate from authentic Japanese cuisine. The management of the Thai Ownership-Type restaurants cleverly uses the ambience of Japanese culture in their advertisements and in the interior designs of the restaurants to attract Thai youngsters who are interested in Japanese cultural products and who are keen to savor the cultural trends of Japan.

The most successful business of this type is the *Oishi Group*. The first *Oishi* (buffet) restaurant was opened on September 9, 1999 on Sukhumvit Soi 55 in Bangkok. Before *Oishi* restaurant, Tan Passakornnatee, the Director and President of *Oishi Group Public Company Ltd.*, had opened a coffee shop and a *sukiyaki* outlet in Chon Buri, but he had lost 200 million Baht in the real estate business. After that happened, Passakornnatee went to the United States and saw restaurant outlets which offered Japanese and Chinese buffets at attractive prices.²⁴ Passakornnatee, after he captured the idea of the buffet style, started the *Oishi* buffet restaurant, under the “all you can eat” concept, 499 Baht per person during lunch and dinner time. The price was rather expensive compared to the prices at stalls selling Thai food on the street, where several people could have a meal for the same price. However, the buffet style of Japanese cuisine attracted many people and long queues soon formed in front of *Oishi* buffet restaurants.

²³ Ashkenazi, Michael & Jacob, Jeanne. (2000) *The essence of Japanese cuisine: an essay on food and culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Pp. 76-77.

²⁴ Puangkanok, Naranart. (2001, December 28) ‘Dining on Oishi success.’ *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.



Figure 3 Shabushi Advertisement. Photo by author.

Following the success of the *Oishi* buffet, the *Oishi Group* opened various food brands in Thailand; *Oishi Ramen* and *IN & OUT The Bakery Café* in 2001, *Shabushi*, *Oishi Sushi Bar* and *Log Home* in 2002, *OK Suki* and *BBG* in 2003, and *Oishi Grand* in 2004. Among the buffet-style brands of the *Oishi Group*, *Shabushi* is the most popular restaurant, with 19 outlets in Thailand (as of December 31, 2008). *Shabushi* is the combined name of two Japanese dishes: “shabu shabu” and “sushi”—but it is neither of the two Japanese dishes (Figure 3). There is a Thai cuisine called “*Thai suki*” which is a type of Thai hot pot dish. In *Thai suki*, seafood, meat and vegetables are boiled in a big pot of broth and, when they are cooked, the customer picks them up and dips them into a spicy sauce to eat. *Shabushi* is, in my observation, a personalized *Thai suki* in a “conveyor belt sushi” style. Just like the conveyor belt sushi restaurant (“*kaiten zushi*”) of Japan, a stream of seafood, different types of meats, vegetables and desserts rotate on a conveyor belt in front of the diners and each diner can pick up saucers of the foods to boil in the hot pot (Figure 4). Although the conveyor belt system seen in sushi restaurants was an invention from Japan, *Shabushi* was an invention of the *Oishi Group*, which has become very popular among the Thai youth today.



Figure 4 Shabushi Hot Pot & Conveyer Belt. Photo by author.

In addition to the restaurant business, the *Oishi Group* launched *Oishi Green Tea* in 2003, which had the result of boosting the green tea boom in Thailand.²⁵ With series of humorous television commercials, the *Oishi Green Tea* brand also gained popularity in the beverage market of Thailand, and many young Thais started to drink the sweetened green tea which was sold in convenience stores, supermarkets and canteens across Thailand. With the success of the food and beverage businesses, the *Oishi Group* listed stocks on the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) in 2004²⁶ and it has become a leading company in the Japanese food boom in Thailand.

Type 3—Mixed Ownership (Joint Venture)-Type Japanese Restaurant

Hachiban Ramen is one of the pioneers which entered the Thai market through the foundation of a joint venture company with a local Thai company. When the Thai partner offered Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd. a joint venture to launch the business in Thailand, *Hachiban Ramen* was in the middle of developing a fast food franchise business in Hokuriku region of Honshu (the main island of Japan). According to Goto Shiro, *Hachiban Ramen* had failed to expand its business in Tokyo on two occasions, and it was expanding its business to the Chubu region, the central part of Honshu, which was less competitive for

²⁵ Srimallee, Somluck. (2002, September 6) 'Oishi diversification: high hopes for green tea', *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; Asawanipont, Nitida. (2004, April 17) 'Green tea: it's not just for sipping anymore.' *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

²⁶ Oishi Group Public Company Ltd. (2009) *Annual report 2008*. Bangkok: Oishi Group.

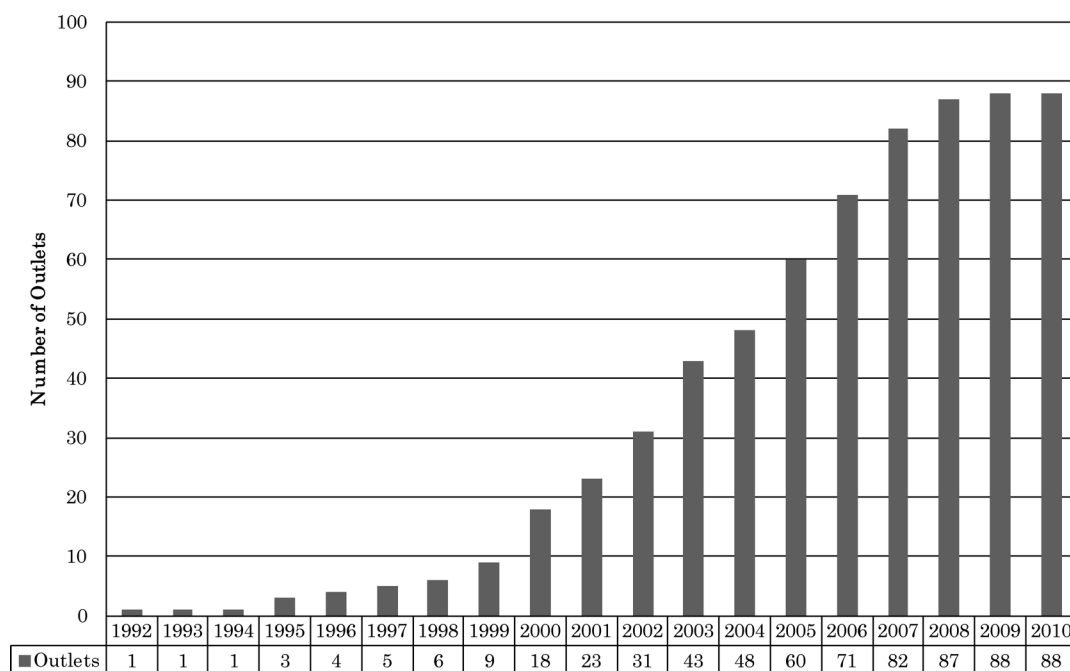


Figure 5 Hachiban Ramen in Thailand 1992–2010

them to launch the business. Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd. was seeking new markets when the Thai partner made an offer to them to come into Thai market.²⁷

As shown in the Figure 5, *Hachiban Ramen* in Thailand started to grow its business in the late 1990s and rapidly increased the number of outlets in Thailand in the 2000s. The mid-1990s in Thailand was a period during which many Japanese TV dramas were being broadcast in Thailand and it was a time when Thai youth became interested in Japanese popular culture.

Today, young people in Bangkok yearn for Japan and are interested in Japanese music, fashion, living styles and movies. Regarding their preferred eating style, they want to have the restaurants from Ginza, Harajuku and Roppongi directly from Japan. Therefore we brought a product which was very close to the Hokuriku *ramen* of Japan. The first restaurant in Bangkok had the tables, the floor, the ceiling and the kitchen, which were same as our restaurant in Japan, just in a larger place. (Goto Shiro, the president of Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd.)²⁸

It is interesting to note in Figure 5 that the number of *Hachiban Ramen* outlets increased dramatically after 2000. This means that *Hachiban Ramen* has been more successful in the 2000s rather than in the 1990s, and the figure may suggest that the Japanese food boom started around 2000. A milestone

²⁷ Goto 2008, *op. cit.*

²⁸ Goto 2008, *op. cit.*, translated by author.

in the Japanese food restaurant business in Thailand around this time was the introduction of buffet-style Japanese food by the *Oishi Group* in 1999. The fact that the introduction of buffet-style Japanese food coincided with the acceleration point of Figure 5 may suggest that the *Oishi* buffet-style might have been a driving force of the Japanese food boom in Thailand, which should be verified with the detailed figures of other Japanese restaurant businesses in Thailand in future studies.

Having seen the success of the Japanese fast food business in Thailand, many other Japanese franchise food chains have launched businesses in Thailand in recent years, such as *Ootoya*, *Mos Berger*, *Coco Ichibanya*, *Saboten* and so on.²⁹ In this Mixed Ownership-Type, an existing brand of Japanese food business is already established in Japan or elsewhere, and the brand launches its business in Thailand with the assistance of a local partner company.

4. Popularization Process of Japanese Food in Thailand

Today, Japanese food is the most favorite foreign fare for Thais when dining out.³⁰ The popularity of Japanese food is not limited to Thailand; it is accepted widely throughout the world. Behind the expanding popularity of Japanese food, there is an image of Japanese food as healthy cuisine. The debut of the image is said to have originated from a 1977 U.S. medical report, which pointed out that heart disease and cancer are frequently caused by too much meat in the diet.³¹ Since then, Japanese food has the reputation of being healthy in many countries, including Thailand; and a typical Japanese meal, which consists of rice, *miso* (soy-bean paste) soup and grilled fish, is considered to be a low-calorie and healthy meal.

Tan Passakornatee, the President of the *Oishi Group*, said in a newspaper interview:

“Our growth is being driven by strong demand from consumers who are concerned about health and well-being.”

“I believe Japanese food and beverages will continue to be popular among Thai people because more and more people are health-conscious.”³²

The *Oishi Group* is not the only company that uses the image of the “healthiness” of Japanese food to

²⁹ Pongvutitham, Achara. (2006, February 13) ‘Japanese restaurant JV: Betagro joins the sushi revolution’, *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; Mos Food Services, Inc. (2007, January 29) *Press release: Tai bankoku e “Mos Bâgâ” hatsu shutten (First “MOS Burger” opened in Bangkok, Thailand)*. Ref. 07-0129-041. Tokyo: MOS FOOD SERVICES, INC.; Vichitsorasatra, Lisnaree. (2007, April 24) ‘Message in a burger’, *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; Asawanipont, Nitida. (2008, March 8) ‘Mos to expand burger chain with seven new branches.’ *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; The Nation. (2008, August 16) ‘Fuji in Japanese curry-restaurant JV.’ *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia; Ootoya Co., Ltd. (2009, November 29) ‘Tenpo kensaku (Search for outlets).’ *Ootoya web site (online)*, <http://www.ootoya.com/search/index.php>, accessed 29 November 2009.

³⁰ *The Nation*. (2009, February 20) ‘Expansion: MK to expand Yayoi chain here and abroad’

³¹ *Asahi Shimbun*. (2008, January 5) ‘Motomu! Kûru na nihonshoku (Wanted! Cool Japanese food).’ p. 3.

³² Chinmaneevong, Chadamas. (2009, May 19) ‘Oishi on course to beat 20% growth target after robust Q1’, *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

promote its products in Thailand. Other companies, both restaurant operators and manufacturers of ready-to-drink green tea, claim in their advertisements that Japanese food is healthy and use this message to promote their products. In the case of Thailand, however, the image of “healthiness” is not the only reason for the increasing popularity of Japanese food. Observing both the consumers and the market in Thailand, I found out that there was a series of circumstances that had boosted the popularity of Japanese foods.

As shown in Table 1 and previous sections in this study, the Japanese restaurants which opened up prior to 1983 were mainly for Japanese residents, which was the preparatory period of Japanese food products for the mass market in Thailand. In the discussion of the history of the popularization of Japanese cuisine in California, USA, Katarzyna J. Cwiertka emphasizes the presence of a Japanese community in California as an important factor in the birth of a Japanese food trend. Cwiertka points out that “the Japanese community was indispensable in the initial transfer of skills and knowledge of sushi making”.³³ The Japanese restaurants catering to the Japanese community hired the local employees, and both the skills and the knowledge of Japanese food were transferred to them.

The proliferation of Japanese cuisine in Thailand also has to do with the Thai chefs who have learned how to cook Japanese dishes. These young men, many of them from Isaan, started out as kitchen hands in real Japanese restaurants. After a few years, they moved up the ladder and began handling the knives and cooking the dishes. Those who’ve worked for seven to 10 years will know how to cook basic Japanese food and will have memorized the Japanese names.³⁴

Panya Pawasena, the general manager of *Mr Sushi* kiosks, told a newspaper reporter that his brother worked as a chef at major Japanese restaurants such as *Fuji* and *Shin Daikoku* for almost 20 years before he joined him to launch *Mr Sushi* kiosks.³⁵ In Thailand, many Thai chefs have been trained in Japanese restaurants established for the Japanese community, and they have contributed to the growth in popularity in Japanese food in later years.

After 1983, *Fuji Restaurant*, an inexpensive Japanese restaurant chain, was launched, and the popularization of Japanese food in Thailand began. Then, in the 1990s, when Japanese television programs, especially dramas, had been brought into Thailand and J-Pop music had gained some popularity among the Thai youth, the fast food Japanese food business *Hachiban Ramen* was also launched. Throughout the 1990s, the youth and middle class Thai people were exposed to those Japanese foods depicted in Japanese television programs and in animation films/series. Watching the dining scenes

³³ Cwiertka, Katarzyna J. (2006) *Modern Japanese cuisine: food, power and national identity*. London: Reaktion. P.183.

³⁴ Redux, Cookman. (2007, January 10) ‘The sushi wars.’ *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

³⁵ Rungfapaisarn, Kwanchai. (2008, March 5) ‘Mr Sushi kiosks bloom in Bangkok.’ *The Nation*. Bangkok: The Nation Multimedia.

Japanese Restaurants in Thailand

Table 1 Launch Year of Major Japanese Restaurant Chains in Thailand 1983–2009

Launch Year	Name of the Restaurant	Type of Food / Restaurant	Operator or JV company in Thailand	Franchiser or the brand holder in Japan
before 1983	Japanese restaurants were for the Japanese residents in Bangkok. Thai people were not familiar with Japanese food and the prices were expensive.			
1983	Fuji Restaurant	The first Japanese restaurant targeted to the Thai consumers.	Fuji Group	N/A
1992	Hachiban Ramen	The first franchise and the first Japanese fast food chain in Thailand.	Thai Hachi-ban Co., Ltd. (JV with a Thai company)	Hachi-ban Co., Ltd.
1999	Oishi Buffet Restaurant	The first buffet "all-you-can-eat" Japanese restaurant in Thailand.	Oishi Group Public Company	N/A
2005	Ootoya Gohan Restaurant	Japanese Franchise Restaurant	Betagro Ootoya Co., Ltd. (JV with Betagro Group)	Ootoya Co., Ltd.
2006	Mos Burger	Japanese Hamburger Restaurant	Mos Foods (Thailand) Co., Ltd. (JV with a Thai company)	Mos Food Services, Inc.
2006	Yamagoya Ramen	Japanese Franchise Ramen Restaurant	Yamagoya (Thailand) Co., Ltd. (JV with Gastronome and Santi Bhirombhakdi [president of Signha Corp])	YS Food
2007	Pepper Lunch Restaurant	Japanese Franchise Rice and Steak Restaurant	Central Restaurants Group	Pepper Food Service
2007	Shibuya Restaurant	Japanese Restaurant	Nature Best Foods	N/A
2008	CoCoICHIBANYA	Japanese Franchise Curry & Rice Restaurant	Ichibanya Midwest Asia Co., Ltd. (JV with Fuji Group)	Ichibanya Co., Ltd.
2008	Bankara Ramen	Japanese Franchise Ramen Restaurant	Siam Win-Thara	Hanaken
2008	Tonkatsu Saboten	Japanese Franchise Tonkatsu (Deep-Fried Pork Cutlet) Restaurant	President Green House Foods Co., Ltd.	Green House Co., Ltd.
2008	Maido Ookini Shokudo	Japanese Franchise Restaurant	Oishi Group Public Company	Fujio Food System
2009	Kazokutei	Japanese Franchise Soba & Udon Noodle Restaurant	Oishi Group Public Company	Kazokutei

* Most launch dates are compiled from the newspaper articles of The Nation, the English newspaper in Thailand.

* The restaurant chains are excluded from this table if the launch dates cannot be found in the newspaper articles or the company web sites.

in the dramas and the animations film/series, they accumulated a variety of knowledge about different types of Japanese cuisine. The popularity of Japanese cultural products and the launch of fast food Japanese restaurants simultaneously happened in the same decade to attract the youth and middle class Thai people to dine in Japanese restaurants. Consequently, more Thai people were given the chance to experience Japanese foods.

Since the mid 2000s, Bangkok has been right in the midst of the Japanese fast food business. In 2005, *Ootoya Gohan Restaurant* opened its first outlet in Bangkok, and many other Japanese fast food brands launched their outlets in Bangkok in the following years. In many cases, the Japanese fast food brands have formed joint ventures with local Thai companies, and in other cases they have become

franchisees of Japanese fast food businesses. In the 2000s, Japanese food is no longer a luxury or something which is consumed infrequently. For the youth and middle class Thais, it has already become an integral part of their lifestyle and they just want to have new things for less expensive prices. To meet the demands of the consumers, many Thai companies introduced Japanese fast food brands to Thailand.

5. Flavor of Japanese Culture

5.1 'Japanese Ambiance'

In *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, Cwiertka points out the endeavors made by the management of the pioneering establishments serving Japanese cuisine in Europe and the United States to recreate a 'Japanese ambiance' in their restaurants.³⁶ In the discussion, the 'Japanese ambiance' consists of Japanese background music, wait staff dressed in kimonos, interiors, red lanterns, and bonsai plants; all of which reflect the stereotypical image of 'traditional' Japanese culture. The 'Japanese ambiance' still persists in high-class restaurants and we sometimes see it in present-day restaurants in Japan. However, the Japanese restaurants in Thailand, especially the new restaurants that have been launched in recent years, seem to have 'another' type of ambiance to attract the Thai youth.

Today, most popular Japanese restaurants in Bangkok have a 'modern Japanese ambiance' in their restaurants instead of the 'traditional Japanese ambiance'. In fact, most Japanese fast food restaurants in Bangkok have almost same interiors and ambiance as their outlets in Japan. Besides the ambiance, the restaurants try to recreate the same taste of the authentic Japanese food with the local resources. Goto Shiro, the president of Hachi-Ban Co., Ltd. in Japan, said in a seminar presentation:

Because the local customers come to eat Japanese food, which is a part of Japanese culture, we have to provide the authentic Japanese taste. One of the factors of the Japanese food boom is healthiness and longevity, but another important thing is modern Japanese culture. Advanced information technology, automobiles, fashion, music and so on are yearned after by the youth of foreign countries.—'We want the modern Japan that we can see in the magazines, movies and on television.'—The Japanese culture that the local customers demand equals the atmosphere of the restaurants in present-day Ginza or Shinjuku, including the ambiance of the restaurants, interiors, designs, services, and presentations of the cuisine. Therefore, hanging lanterns and curtains at the entrance of the restaurant or displaying a picture of Mount Fuji on the wall of the restaurant as an interior is absolutely wrong. (Goto Shiro)³⁷

Japanese restaurants in Thailand use the healthiness of Japanese food in their advertisements to attract the attention of Thai people. But, as Goto pointed out, many customers visit Japanese restaurants to sa-

³⁶ Cwiertka 2006, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

³⁷ Goto 2007, *op. cit.*, translated by author.

vor Japanese culture as well as the food. Therefore, these Japanese fast food restaurants have brought the ambiance of the outlet in Ginza to Bangkok, and the customers experience the culture which they have seen on Japanese television dramas.

5.2 Authentic vs. Localized Japanese Food

It is also important to note that, at least for the Japanese brand restaurants, the food should reflect the authentic taste of Japanese cuisine as Goto pointed out. In their discussion of hybridization of Japanese food in foreign countries, Ng and Goda reported the localization of sushi in Singapore by pointing out that sushi in Singapore has been localized in terms of the taste and the resources. In the discussion, they listed three reasons for the localization: (1) the difficulties to obtain the resources to create authentic Japanese cuisine, (2) the local chefs, and (3) the preferred tastes of the local consumers. Ng and Goda concluded that these factors fostered the localization of Japanese foods in Singapore.³⁸

In Thailand, there are also some localized Japanese foods (or quasi-Japanese foods), but the demand for the real Japanese cuisine supports certain restaurants to serving authentic Japanese foods. For instance, Japanese restaurants operated by Thai companies without Japanese partners tend to provide localized or “fusion” Japanese foods. It is not, however, due to a lack of Japanese food supplies that these restaurants provide localized Japanese foods. The fact that they do not have Japanese management or kitchen staff seems to have made them simply discard the authenticity of the cuisine and lead them to choose to create original foods.

In order to run a Japanese restaurant business in Thailand, it is inevitable that some of the food supplies be imported from Japan. However, *japonica rice* is now grown in the northern part of Thailand and can be supplied locally. *Indica rice*, which is grown widely in Thailand, is not suitable for Japanese cuisine, especially not for sushi, and *japonica rice* is necessary for Japanese food. Thus, the local supply of *japonica rice* is a great advantage for Japanese restaurants in Thailand. Many Japanese fast food chains that launched their business in recent years claim that they procure resources locally and provide the same taste of the food as in Japan itself. Observing the statements made by the managements of each Japanese restaurant chain, therefore, the taste of the food seems to be determined by the management of the restaurant, not by the availability of the resources.

As Goto said, there are many customers who want a taste of Japanese culture in Japanese restaurants. In Thailand, especially in Bangkok, there are various types of Japanese restaurants—traditional and modern, fast food and slow food, luxury and casual, authentic and localized—and the customers can choose one from the variations depending on appetites, budgets, occasions and purposes.

6. Concluding Remarks—Japanese Food as a Cultural Product

In Thailand, there are two perspectives to view the consumption of Japanese food. Firstly, Japanese

³⁸ Ng, Wai-ming & Goda, Miho. (2001) 'The popularization of Sushi in Singapore: issues in globalization and localization.' *Southeast Asian Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 2. (September 2001) Pp. 258-274.

food is a part of urban lifestyle for middle class Thais who are health conscious and who can afford the prices. Secondly, Japanese cuisine is a fashionable trend for those Thai youth who are also interested in Japanese cultural products and trends. The driving force to consume more Japanese food in Thailand demands that Japanese fast food chains launch outlets in Thailand. In addition to the Japanese fast food restaurant chains that I have already mentioned in previous sections, there have been more fast food brands launching businesses in recent years, such as *Yamagoya Ramen*, *Pepper Lunch Restaurant*, *Bangkara Ramen*, *Tonkatsu Saboten*, *Maido Ookini Shokudo*, and *Kazokutei*. The Japanese food business in Thailand is still growing rapidly, and Thai consumers have adopted the food as an integral part of their diet.

As we have seen in this study, the Japanese food boom in Thailand did not happen in one big wave motion, but it has been fostered by a synchronization of small waves of health consciousness, the environment/entertainment factors of some restaurants, and the yearning for Japanese culture. To put it another way, the Japanese food boom seems very big on the surface, but close observation reveals that various kinds of Japanese food products, from localized Japanese to authentic Japanese, are synchronized by the image of “Japanese” to make up the Japanese food business in Thailand. Thai consumers consume Japanese culture in the Japanese food boom, which is a part of the trend of Japanese cultural products consumption in Thailand. In addition to the factors of health consciousness and the actual taste of the food, Japanese restaurants are the place for consumption of *kawaii* (cute), cool and fashionable Japanese culture.