



Title	“Japan in Thailand” : Japanese-Themed Establishments and the Tourist Image of Japan among Thai People
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Citation	Exploring Global Collaborative Learning. 2026, p. 24-35
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/106358
rights	
Note	

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“Japan in Thailand”: Japanese-Themed Establishments and the Tourist Image of Japan among Thai People

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Abstract: This study investigates how Thai people imagine Japan as a tourist destination through the lens of six Japanese-themed establishments in Thailand (JTET), combined with questionnaires and interviews with visitors and creators. Frequently recurring motifs include Japanese garden elements (bamboo, rock lanterns, stepping stones, and water features), red lanterns, torii gates, and such iconic symbols such as cherry blossoms, red maple leaves, Mount Fuji, the good fortune cat, ema votive plaques, daruma dolls, and sunshine dolls. The survey responses of 105 participants show that these establishments are viewed as offering a limited but meaningful substitute for actual travel to Japan, with those who have never visited Japan assigning slightly higher scores. The findings demonstrate that the Thai image of Japan is not a simple reflection of Japanese self-presentation but is actively coproduced by Thai consumers, entrepreneurs, and religious institutions. Japanese-themed establishments operate simultaneously as commercial entertainment venues and informal learning spaces, generating localized meanings of Japanese symbols that are embedded within Thai cultural and religious contexts.

1. Introduction

This study explores how Thai people conceptualize Japan as a tourist destination by examining Japanese-themed establishments in Thailand (JTET). The central research question is: *What is the image of Japan as a tourist attraction through the lens of the Thai people?*

Japanese-themed spaces have gained increasing popularity in Thailand since the early 2010s, particularly community malls and cultural parks. These spaces are closely linked to the Thai boom in Japanese food and a broader Japanization in Thai consumer culture. Concurrently, Japanese tourism authorities and government institutions have systematically promoted the image of Japan abroad, including in Thailand.

By combining a historical overview, literature review, thematic framework, and empirical analysis of sites and visitor perceptions, this paper demonstrates how Japan-themed spaces in Thailand reflect and reshape Thai images of Japan.

2. Background: Japanese-Themed Establishments in Thailand

In this study, “Japanese-themed establishments” are defined as cultural parks centered on Japanese culture or establishments that feature a Japanese-themed park as a major component. Previous research on Thai theme parks notes that many are modeled after well-known international cities, particularly European ones. Commonly serving as shopping and dining complexes, zoos, and venues for shows, they are situated near major domestic tourist destinations such as Khao Yai, Hua Hin, Cha-am, and Pattaya. In Bangkok, community malls evoke a foreign

atmosphere that evokes the experience of “traveling abroad while remaining in Thailand” (Chiratiwatawat, 2017).

While European-themed parks dominate this landscape, Japanese-themed cultural spaces have emerged since the early 2010s, coinciding with a marked expansion of Japanese food culture in Thailand (Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2013). Community malls like J-Park (built in 2015) and The Paseo Park (built in 2014) exemplify this trend. Notably, The Paseo Park followed The Paseo Town, a European-themed mall built by the same franchise, indicating an extension of the cultural park model to Japanese theming.

Japanese-themed establishments show a distinctive pattern from other foreign-themed parks. Whereas Venice-themed spaces, for example, are largely controlled by a single operator (“Siam Venezia” in Hua Hin and Cha-am), several companies have entered the Japanese-themed market and new competitors continue to appear, such as Hinoki Land (built in 2018).

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Harajuku Thailand (built in 2022) was established, and Japanese-style features began to be incorporated into hotels, cafés, and, notably, Thai temples. Social media trends during and after the pandemic amplified the visibility of these sites, presenting J-Park, Hinoki Land, Harajuku Thailand, and others as spaces that resemble Japan or symbolically function as “Japan in Thailand.”

3. Literature Review

Research on the image of Japan in Thailand remains limited in both quantity and thematic scope, and has tended to focus on Japonisme in literature and film (Hiramatsu, 2021). Tanshinmankon (2023) examines the historical transformation of Japan’s image in Thailand from wartime anti-Japanese sentiment to widespread acceptance and Japanization in the 1990s. The present study examines a more recent period and approaches the topic from the perspective of tourism and themed spaces.

The most representative materials on the image of Japan as a travel destination for Thai people are produced by the JNTO. For a preliminary investigation, this study consulted the *Visitor Travel Market Marketing Manual* series (*Mākettingu manyuaru: Hō’nichi ryo’kōsha yūchi no tame no handobukku*) and its successor, the *JNTO Handbook for Promoting Tourism to Japan* (*JNTO Hō’nichi ryokō yūchi handobukku*), published since the 2000s.

3.1 JNTO Findings on Japan as a Travel Destination

JNTO first highlighted sakura (cherry blossoms) as an iconic attraction in the 2003 edition. By 2004, it noted that Thai people were more interested in sakura than the Japanese might expect, and the 2005/2006 edition records strong interest in viewing, rather than climbing, Mount Fuji. Thus, in the 2000s, Thai tourists’ image of Japan was largely limited to sakura and Mount Fuji.

In the 2010s, the range of attractions expanded. The Hokkaido snow festival and lavender fields triggered a “Hokkaido boom” in 2011, and autumn foliage became prominent in 2013, while hot springs began to gain popularity among Thai tourists from 2016.

During the 2000s, Japan's image as a travel destination remained relatively narrow, centered on natural icons such as sakura and Mount Fuji and technological symbols like the Shinkansen (2005/2006) and Tokyo (2013). By contrast, the 2010s saw the diversification of representative travel experiences to include Japanese cuisine, shopping in Tokyo and Osaka, and theme parks.

3.2 Popular Tourist Destinations

Starting with the 2007/2008 edition, JNTO reports the rankings of popular destinations among Thai visitors. Tokyo, Osaka, Hokkaido, Mount Fuji, Kyoto, and the Chubu region appear consistently, although their relative positions vary.

Hokkaido's rise is particularly striking, from 5th place in 2007/2008 to 2nd in 2011, and 1st from 2016 onward. Tokyo remained highly ranked in all years but fell to 2nd place after Hokkaido overtook it, while Osaka gradually declined from 2nd to 5th by 2019. Mount Fuji has remained in the upper ranks throughout, and Kyoto also stayed consistently within the top five. This suggests that Thai images of Japan as a travel destination combine nature, technological modernity, and iconic urban centers and that these images have diversified over time.

4. Theoretical Framework

JTET are treated in this study as a form of cultural park. Following the theoretical framework presented in *Theming: Modes of Representation in Theme Parks* (Anton et al., 2023), theme parks are defined not simply by possessing rides or entertainment facilities but by the consistent application of a coherent theme.

Japanese-themed establishments capitalize upon the appeal of a distant culture whose attractiveness derives from its perceived difference, novelty, and distinctiveness. This exoticism is grounded in the "geological imagination": the cultural representation of faraway places through simplified, homogeneous images of cities, countries, or entire regions.

Because most JTET are operated by private enterprises, their theming must rely upon easily recognizable symbols. Their commercial success depends on evoking immediate associations with Japan. Failure to establish a clear thematic link risks diminishing visitor enjoyment and disrupting an immersive experience.

To achieve recognizability, these spaces simplify and stylize "Japan" through familiar visual references, sounds, colors, and other cues that draw upon stereotypes and widely shared expectations of Japanese culture—what can be termed the Thai audience's "horizon of expectations."

In this way, Japanese-themed establishments adopt and strengthen existing notions of Japan. By carefully curating recognizable images and symbols, they reflect and reinforce the preconceived expectations that Thai tourists hold of Japan as a destination. Studying these spaces to identify which cultural symbols are repeatedly selected, how they resonate with visitor expectations, and the extent to which they are perceived as authentic thus offers researchers insight into the "Thai tourist gaze": the values, interests, and aspirations that shape the Thai imaginaries of Japan.

5. Methodology

Based on the above framework, this study analyzes Japanese-themed establishments as a lens to observe the Thai people's image of Japan. Two main methods were employed: (1) the analysis of objects and spaces within selected establishments, and (2) the elicitation of visitor and creator perspectives through questionnaires.

5.1 Site Selection and Observation

On-site investigations were conducted at six JTET:

1. J-Park
2. Hinoki Land
3. Harajuku Thailand
4. Wat Khao Din
5. Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan
6. Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa

The first three sites represent different types of Japanese-themed parks: a commercial community mall (J-Park), a pre-COVID cultural park (Hinoki Land), and a post-COVID cultural park (Harajuku Thailand). The three temples were selected because they feature Japanese motifs integrated into Thai Buddhist spaces, a trend that gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. The observations focused on the objects, spatial arrangements, and experiences that the creators themselves regarded as typically or recognizably Japanese.

5.2 Questionnaires and Interviews

Questionnaires were administered in person at the six sites and online via social media. Respondents accessed the questionnaires through Google Forms, primarily via URLs and QR codes. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-ended questions regarding visitors' perceptions of Japanese culture, their impressions during and after their visits, and their previous experiences with Japan, including whether they had ever traveled there.

In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with designers and entrepreneurs responsible for the six establishments to explore their motivations, design philosophies, and business strategies, particularly regarding the selection and arrangement of Japanese motifs.

6. Results

6.1 Observation Results

The analysis focuses on elements that appeared in more than half of the investigated establishments. Frequently observed features included:

Table 1: Observation Results

	J-Park	Hinoki Land	Harajuku Thailand	Wat Khao Din	Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan	Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa
Red Lanterns	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tori'i	○	○	○	○	○	○
Bamboo	○	○	○	○	○	○

Rock Lanterns	○	○	○	×	○	○
Sakura	○	○	○	○	×	○
Stepping Stones	○	○	○	○	×	○
Daruma Dolls	○	○	○	○	×	×
Good Fortune Cats (Maneki Neko)	×	○	○	○	×	○
Wall Paintings of Tourist Attractions	○	○	○	○	×	×
Red Maple Leaves (Momiji)	○	○	○	○	×	×
Mt. Fuji	○	○	○	○	×	×
Bamboo Fences	×	×	○	○	○	○
Waterscapes	○	○	○	○	×	×
Rock Groups	○	×	×	○	○	○
Ema Votive Plaques	○	×	○	○	○	×
Sunshine Dolls (Teru Teru Bōzu)	○	×	○	○	○	×

6.1.1 Japanese Garden Elements

These findings complement JNTO data by highlighting additional symbols that are not strongly emphasized in JNTO publications, particularly ones drawn from Japanese landscape gardens. Rock lanterns and stepping stones appeared in five locations, while rock arrangements, water features, and bamboo fences appeared in four.

Some sites (Wat Khao Din, Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, and J-Park) featured dedicated garden zones combining these elements with sakura, momiji, bamboo, statues, and red-arched bridges. Others, such as Hinoki Land and Harajuku Thailand, integrated garden motifs throughout their sites to create a pervasive atmosphere.

Bamboo was present at all six locations and used in two main ways. In Hinoki Land and Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, bamboo forests modeled after Arashiyama were created, while in the others, bamboo appeared as decorative elements, for example alongside bridges in Harajuku Thailand.

6.1.2 Red Lanterns and Tori'i Gates

Red lanterns and red tori'i gates emerged as signature motifs across all establishments, despite not being highlighted in JNTO analyses. Interviews with the creators confirmed that they consciously prioritize tori'i and red lanterns when designing Japanese-themed spaces.

Lanterns appeared in multiple styles, often combining long-shaped (*nagagata*) and round-shaped (*marugata*) forms. Some were illuminated, while others were not. Regardless of budget, lanterns were consistently selected as decorations, though budgetary factors influenced whether secondhand lanterns (Wat Khao Din) or customized ones (J-Park) were used. Their designs included sakura motifs, the name of the establishment, and inscriptions like "Izakaya," particularly when lanterns were purchased secondhand. At J-Park, a giant red lantern modeled on the Asakusa lantern served as a striking landmark.

Tori'i gates were commonly modeled after the thousand gates at Fushimi Inari Shrine. At Hinoki Land, Wat Khao Din, and Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, sequences of tori'i led to major landmarks, such as a Kinkakuji replica, the main temple structures, or Guan Yin statues. At J-Park and Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, tori'i primarily served as visual attractions, inviting visitors to walk under multiple gates. At Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, the tori'i motif was also incorporated into the signage, reinforcing its association with Japanese culture.

Red lanterns, tori'i gates, and red fences together produced a consistent red theme that contributed strongly to the perception of a "Japanese" atmosphere.

6.1.3 Ema

Ema boards appeared in four sites, with considerable variation in design and function. At Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, the ema featured the image of a Great Buddha rather than traditional motifs like horses or zodiac signs. Some establishments allowed visitors to purchase ema and write wishes in Thai and other languages (e.g., Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan, J-Park). Others, such as Harajuku Thailand, used ema purely as decorative elements with prewritten messages and no writing facilities. Thus, ema functioned both as interactive cultural artifacts and static decorative motifs.

6.1.4 Maneki Neko

White Maneki Neko statues were found at four locations, and images also appeared on flags at Wat Phrathat Doi Phra Chan. In some places, notably Hinoki Land, Wat Khao Din (also known as "Maneki Neko Land"), and Harajuku Thailand, large Maneki Neko statues served as major landmarks distinct from other attractions like Kinkakuji replicas or shrine areas. At Wat Khao Soon Jem Fa, large Maneki Neko statues were placed within the Japanese garden area, though not as the main landmark.

The frequent use of white Maneki Neko suggests that they have become powerful cultural icons of "Japan" in Thailand, comparable to landmark tourist attractions. Two factors appear to underlie their prominence: the influence of Hinoki Land, which inspired subsequent sites, including Wat Khao Din, and the long-standing

familiarity of Maneki Neko in Thai restaurants and shops as symbols of good fortune and prosperity.

6.1.5 Daruma and Teru Teru Bōzu

Daruma figures were found in four facilities, differing in size, color, and function. At Wat Khao Din, a large red daruma with the inscription 良衆 and only its left eye filled is surrounded by smaller daruma in various colors. Teru teru bōzu are widely used as hanging decorations in Harajuku Thailand and J-Park, contributing to the visual atmosphere. At Wat Khao Din, some teru teru bōzu serve a functional role as objects on which visitors can write wishes. In sum, the observations confirm JNTO's emphasis on symbols such as Mount Fuji, sakura, and famous destinations, while also revealing additional motifs, especially garden elements, red lanterns, and torii, that strongly evoke Japaneseness for Thai audiences.

6.2 Survey Results

A total of 156 questionnaire responses were collected. When asked whether they knew of or had visited Japanese-styled establishments in Thailand, 63 respondents (38.9%) reported that they knew of or had visited such places, 57 (35.2%) reported neither knowing of nor visiting them, and 42 (25.9%) knew of them but had never visited. Those who answered "I know or have visited an establishment" or "I know but have never visited" proceeded to the main questionnaire, yielding 105 complete responses (64.8%).

Respondents ranged from primary school children to people over 60 years old: 1% were primary school students, 35.2% were secondary school students, 21% were university students, 15.2% were under 40 years old (non-students), 21.9% between 40 and 60, and 5.7% were over 60.

Regarding familiarity with Japan, 48 respondents (45.7%) had visited Japan, whereas 57 (54.3%) had never been. This relatively even division allows comparison between those with and without first-hand experience.

6.2.1 Substitutability of Japanese-Themed Establishments

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) how much visiting Japanese-themed attractions in Thailand could replace going to Japan. The overall average score was 5.16, with 5 the most frequent response. The distribution indicates diverse opinions on authenticity and cultural satisfaction.

Visitors Who Have Been to Japan

The average of the scores given by the 48 respondents who had visited Japan was 4.61, and the most frequent rating was 5 (24%). Scores of 3 (18%) and 2 (16%) were also common, suggesting a tendency toward lower substitutability. Higher scores like 7 (13%) and 8 (7%) were present but less frequent. Extremely low (1, 2%) and extremely high (10, 4%) scores were rare.

The reasons given for lower ratings included cultural differences (32%), differences in weather and climate (24%), and differences in scale (18%). More detailed comments noted that Thailand is much hotter than Japan, that Japanese-themed establishments are cheaper but cannot fully replace actual travel, that the

services and hospitality are perceived as inferior to Japanese standards, and that the experience feels inauthentic. Some respondents added that such establishments may be suitable substitutes for those who cannot travel to Japan or that they can temporarily ease the desire to visit Japan but cannot replicate the country's uniqueness.

Visitors Who Have Not Been to Japan

Among respondents who had never visited Japan, the average score was 5.27, with 5 being the most frequent rating (27%), followed by 4 (18%) and 7 (15%). Lower scores such as 3 (4%) and 2 (5%) were relatively rare, whereas higher scores such as 8 (11%) and 10 (5%) appeared more often than among those who had visited Japan. Extremely low (1, 2%) and extremely high (10, 5%) scores remained relatively uncommon.

The reasons given for their evaluations included: "people who have never been to Japan can experience Japan" (26.2%), weather and climate differences (13.9%), and cultural differences (15.4%). Additional comments emphasized variety and enjoyment, affordability for those with limited budgets, the distinctive pleasures of imitation, and the opportunities that these spaces afford Thai people to learn about Japan.

6.2.2 Interpretation

Criticism of the visual quality of the establishments was not particularly frequent. Respondents who evaluated the spaces positively often regarded them as convenient ways to experience "Japan," and some felt that they offered opportunities to learn about Japanese culture.

However, many comments highlighted aspects of Japan that were considered unique and difficult to replicate, notably Japanese service/hospitality and the weather and climate in Japan. For those who had visited Japan, Japanese-themed establishments tended to function as nostalgic reminders rather than full substitutes, while for those who had never visited Japan, they offered enjoyable and meaningful opportunities to encounter "Japan" within Thailand.

7. Discussion

The discussion is organized into three themes: (1) the image of Japan and its cultural signifiers, (2) how this image is produced, and (3) how it is received.

7.1 Cultural Signifiers and the Image of Japan

The results align with JNTO data regarding key cultural signifiers such as sakura, Mount Fuji, trains, and other iconic images. However, the JNTO documents mainly discuss symbols located within Japan itself. This study shows that in Thailand, certain Japanese motifs have acquired new meanings through local use.

Tori'i, for example, are not restricted to religious contexts but serve as gates to an "exotic" world, often marking landmarks or central attractions. The Maneki Neko has likewise undergone a transformation into oversized landmarks and central visual icons. Thus, while the basic repertoire of Japanese symbols overlaps with

those used in Japanese tourism promotion, their functions and meanings in Thailand have been partially reconfigured.

7.2 Production: The Role of Creators and Marketing

The image of Japan in Thailand is shaped not only by Japanese institutions but also by Thai consumers and producers. Entrepreneurs and temple authorities play a central role in selecting and arranging Japanese motifs, with marketing a key driving force. The need to attract visitors and sell products encourages the curation of a limited yet visually strong set of cultural elements that then inform how Japanese culture is perceived.

This process is consistent with broader trends of Japanization in the food and retail industries in Thailand, where selective aspects of Japanese culture are repeatedly highlighted and commodified.

7.3 Reception: Learning, Aspiration, and Religion

Regarding reception, two points are particularly important.

First, many respondents who have never been to Japan view Japanese-themed establishments as affording opportunities to learn about the country, even though these spaces are primarily designed for entertainment. This blurring of entertainment and education helps explain why the image of Japan in Thailand may differ from that in Japan's intended self-presentation, including the JNTO and Cool Japan initiatives.

Second, there is a strong desire among Thai people to connect with Japan, including through religious symbols. Although Thai Buddhist temples are traditionally regarded as sacred spaces not to be freely altered, Japanese religious motifs like the Maneki Neko and Shinto-inspired imagery are readily incorporated into temple grounds.

This relative openness is plausibly enabled by a widely shared interpretive frame that emphasizes cultural proximity through Buddhism, which lowers the perceived boundary between "Thai" and "non-Thai" religious elements. Luo's (2016) interviews regarding Guanyin worship in Thailand illustrate this inclusive orientation: Respondents described reverence for diverse Buddhas and deities (including those associated with Indian and Chinese traditions) and stress that merit-making is comparable across Chinese and Thai temples, implying that perceived contradictions with Thai Theravāda practice are limited. Within this logic of compatibility, Japanese-origin objects can be domesticated rather than merely displayed. In some cases, Japanese Buddhist figures are physically modified to better align with Thai aesthetic and devotional conventions. For example, a supervising monk at Wat Phrathat Doi Prachan reportedly altered the features of the Great Buddha statue, such as hair curls and hand gestures, to more closely approximate Thai Buddha-image styles. The Maneki Neko provides a parallel case at the level of everyday religiosity and commercial practice. While it functions in Japan as a conventional emblem of good fortune, it has been readily adopted in Thailand, where small statues are commonly placed in shops and restaurants and are

often interpreted as functionally equivalent to Nang Kwak, a Thai talisman associated with attracting customers and prosperity.

Conclusion

This study examined how Thai people imagine Japan as a tourist destination through the analysis of JTET. By combining site observations, questionnaires, and interviews, we have shown that the image of Japan is constructed through a recurring set of visual and spatial motifs (garden elements, red lanterns, tori'i, Maneki Neko, ema, daruma, and others) that are selected, adapted, and sometimes enlarged or recontextualized.

While these motifs overlap with the tourism image of Japan promoted by JNTO, especially in relation to nature and iconic landmarks, their meanings in Thailand have been shaped by commercial strategies, local religious practices, and the expectations of Thai consumers. Japanese-themed establishments operate simultaneously as entertainment venues and informal sites of cultural learning, especially for those who have never visited Japan.

Overall, the findings suggest that the image of Japan in Thailand is coproduced by Japanese and Thai actors and has diverged somewhat from Japan's self-representation, even as it remains anchored in a shared repertoire of recognizable symbols. Future research could examine how these localized images of Japan influence actual travel decisions and how they have evolved alongside changes in Thai consumer culture and Japanese tourism promotion.

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