

# Khon Yipun in the Land of Smiles

By Tanaka Hiroko

WITH about 20,000 officially registered residents, the Japanese are by far the largest foreign presence in Bangkok, the City of Angels. In addition to this, there are “made in Japan” life-style products and the evident influence that Japanese culture has on Thai culture. It is clear that Japan is a force to be reckoned with in many spheres of Thai daily life. Based on my personal experience of having been based in Bangkok for more than a decade, this article explores what the basis might be for this abundance of Japanese things and to what extent the Japanese presence can be viewed as mutually advantageous.

While the official figure is 20,000 as noted above, the total *Khon Yipun* or Japanese population in the greater Bangkok metropolitan area is probably close to 50,000 if those who are not registered are included. Although the figure has declined since its peak period before the financial crisis of 1997, the business establishments that cater exclusively to the Japanese expatriate community seem to be thriving as ever in

booming Bangkok. They range from supermarkets and restaurants to barber shops and dentists; and from Japanese kindergartens and schools to *karaoke* bars and nightclubs in the red-light districts. The physical presence of the Japanese population in Thailand is further strengthened with the large number of tourists that visit the country throughout the year. Thailand is, in many ways, a comfortable place for the Japanese, culturally as well as financially.

The cultural and material influence of Japan in Bangkok in particular, and to some extent in Thailand as a whole, is also pervasive and hard to miss. Here, “made in Japan” is a symbol of “modern,” “progressive,” “smart,” “fashionable” and “high-tech,” in contrast to the notion and image held in the West, where Japan is often associated with exotic and mystical traditional images of the Far East. Indeed, Japan has as much or even greater influence as the United States over the pop-culture scene in Thailand, particularly among young people. Examples include snacks, cos-

metics and toiletry items, fashion, pop music and icons, animation and TV characters for children and teenagers, computer games, (often slightly wrong) Japanese characters on T-shirts, as well as the number of young people who aspire to acquire the Japanese language at universities and language schools. Japanese food is also considered fashionable and there are numerous Japanese restaurants that cater primarily to Thai people. Many TV commercials on Thai channels are reminiscent of those on Japanese TV, including the concept as well as the way the actors and actresses look. The new subway system in Bangkok, and other numerous infrastructure projects have been built with loans and other schemes of Official Development Assistance from Japan. Last but not least, the present Thai Government has introduced a large-scale grassroots programme called “One Tambon! One Product (OTOP),” which is modeled after the “One Village One Product” programme in Japan.

More than anywhere else, Japanese people, products and culture jointly present themselves. This is why the presence of Japan in Bangkok is atypically strong and is likely to stay this way in the foreseeable future. In nearby cities, such as Yangon, Dhaka or Calcutta, there is hardly any trace of Japanese cultural influence. The situation also contrasts with the strong Japanese business presence in some Western countries several decades ago, which was often criticized as “faceless” since people only saw brands such as Toyota and Sony without seeing the Japanese people and culture behind such “products.” From the above, it appears fair to conclude that this omni-presence is the result of mutual love, based on mutual respect and understanding. Or the phrase “marriage of convenience” would describe the situation more accurately.

Japanese expatriates, business travelers and tourists usually find Thailand a



Notes : 1) Sub-district

comfortable place to stay and it would seem that the Thai people generally like Japan and the Japanese, considering them “desirable.” There appears to be a degree of comfort or affinity between the two cultures. They share Buddhism as a major source of influence, and both tend to be rather pragmatic and share the famous ambiguous smile. On a cultural level, Japanese are arguably closer to the Thais than Western expatriates and also tend to have a better grasp of the Thai language. One example is that nurses and doctors at major private hospitals in Bangkok only

ask me, a married Japanese woman, whether I speak Thai (not whether I speak Thai or English), in deciding whether to use the Japanese interpreters stationed in the hospital. There is a degree of expectation that a Japanese wife might speak good enough Thai to communicate her health problems to the medical staff, while there is almost no expectation that she might have a decent command of English (whereas almost all staff at these hospitals speak English).

It would, however, be optimistic to assume that this good grasp of Thai language and cultural closeness translates into an integration of the Japanese expatriates in Thai society. Many Japanese tend to operate largely within the safety of an all-Japanese environment. A significant proportion of Japanese businessmen have left their wives and children in Japan, frequently due to reasons related to children’s education, and spend their early evenings in Japanese *izakaya*<sup>2</sup>-type places, where they sit by themselves at the bar having a set-dinner or *ramen* noodles with a bottle of beer, while reading Japanese *manga* or cartoon mag-

azines, with NHK<sup>3</sup> in the background. The wives of the Japanese families living in Bangkok are usually seen at lunch venues and shopping malls with fellow Japanese housewives. Arrogant Japanese business travelers at airport check-in counters, shouting at Thai ground hostesses in broken English, are unfortunately an all too common sight. At the same time, it is also debatable whether these behaviors match the generally held modern, high-tech image of Japan.

There is an even more serious gulf between the “modern” and “high-tech” and even “rich” image of the Japanese and the reality of the middle-class Japanese lifestyle in Japan. Since Japan climbed up the ladder of the “industrialized nations,” perhaps rather prematurely quickly, the government as well as its people appear to have a tendency to act as a “donor” in Asia, who is there to help the others solve their problems. In my view, there are ample issues and concerns that the ordinary citizens

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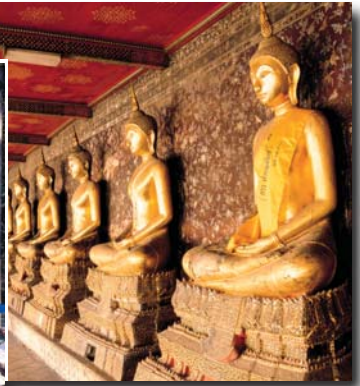


Photo : Courtesy of Katsumi YOSHIDA/JICA



of these two Asian nations share with each other, yet there is little readiness among the Japanese to openly discuss and exchange these with the “beneficiaries.” The apparent love between the Thais and the Japanese might indeed begin to be founded on mutual understanding and respect when there is a humble recognition of each other’s reality. However, the Japanese expatriates in Bangkok today appear to be more focused on enjoying their few years of luxury in Bangkok, before being sent back to their small apartments in Tokyo. **J.S**

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2) Casual bars, with mainly bar-counter seats, which also serve meals  
3) The Japan Broadcasting Corporation