

Representation and Cultural Consumption of Mainland Southeast Asia Restaurants in Japan: Between Culinary Openness and the Reproduction of Exoticism

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Abstract

This study examines how Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines are represented and experienced in Japan's contemporary food culture. It investigates whether the limited visibility of these cuisines signifies cultural inclusion or reproduces symbolic hierarchies that render them "unique" yet peripheral. Drawing on frameworks from food studies, postcolonial theory, and symbolic consumption, the research examines how culinary narratives, menu design, and visual iconography construct and mediate exoticism. Employing a qualitative, descriptive-comparative approach, the study combines digital mapping and content analysis of restaurant websites, menus, and social media with secondary data from academic and media sources. Data were collected between June 2024 and June 2025, during which online restaurant information and digital content were systematically documented and analyzed. By comparing these non-dominant cuisines with the more established Thai and Vietnamese representations, the study reveals how Japan's engagement with Mainland Southeast Asia oscillates between empathy and aestheticized othering. Ultimately, this study argues that Japan's celebrated "culinary openness" may coexist with subtle forms of symbolic hierarchy, shaping how minority cuisines from Mainland Southeast Asia are positioned within everyday consumption. The findings show that the limited visibility of Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines cannot be explained solely by migrant population size. Instead, it is shaped by the interaction of demographic factors, historical ties, and symbolic representations that influence public familiarity. The study contributes to food studies by demonstrating that Japan's culinary openness coexists with symbolic hierarchies that unevenly position Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines within the country's multicultural foodscape.

Keyword: culinary openness; exoticism; restaurant; Southeast Asia

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the popularity of Southeast Asian cuisine in Japan has increased significantly. In this study, the term Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines refers to

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culinary traditions originating from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The designation follows the geographical distinction commonly used in Southeast Asian studies between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia (Osborne, 2013; Tarling, 1993). While these cuisines are internally diverse and should not be treated as a homogeneous cultural category, they share certain historical and geographical contexts, including rice-based food systems, Theravada Buddhist influences, and long-standing patterns of regional interaction. This study focuses specifically on the less visible cuisines of Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, while using Thai and Vietnamese cuisines as comparative benchmarks due to their more established presence in Japan.

Thai cuisine represented by iconic dishes such as *pad thai* and *tom yum*, while Vietnamese cuisine, particularly *pho* and *banh mi*, have secured prominent positions within Japan's urban gastronomic landscape. The success of these two countries in promoting their culinary images is reflected not only in the proliferation of restaurants but also in the penetration of packaged food products into retail markets, the organization of international food festivals, and sustained media coverage that has contributed to shaping favorable public perceptions among Japanese consumers. In contrast, cuisines from other parts of Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, remain relatively less recognized and underrepresented within Japan's public culinary sphere. Although a number of restaurants claim culinary identities associated with these countries, their presence tends to be spatially concentrated and comparatively less visible, often located in specific urban enclaves and lacking the mainstream recognition achieved by Thai or Vietnamese cuisine.

This disparity raises an important question: how are non-dominant Mainland South East Asia cuisines represented and positioned within Japanese society? Does the presence of these restaurants reflect a genuine openness toward Southeast Asian cultural diversity, or does it instead reinforce constructions of "exoticism" that frame foreign cultures as intriguing yet marginal? Culinary authenticity and exoticism are modern social constructs often associated with values such as individuality and uniqueness (authenticity), as well as novelty and difference (exoticism). In this context, exoticism functions as a *double-edged sword*, enabling the acceptance of non-Western cultures so long as they are not perceived as excessively unfamiliar (Johnston & Baumann, 2007). From a postcolonial perspective, exoticism operates as an aesthetic mode oscillating between strangeness and familiarity, rendering other cultures appealing while simultaneously maintaining symbolic distance (Huggan, 2002).

Studies on ethnic restaurants in Japan have highlighted their role as both economic enterprises and cultural interfaces through which migrants and local residents interact. Nakagawa et al. (2022) argue that cultural acceptance is reflected in the consumption of culture-specific goods and services, with ethnic restaurants serving as a measurable manifestation of this acceptance. Using data from Tokyo municipalities, they demonstrate a positive relationship between the presence of foreign residents and the number of ethnic restaurants, suggesting that migrant communities create both demand and social infrastructure for the growth of ethnic food businesses. Ethnic restaurants therefore function not merely as commercial establishments but also as indicators of cultural acceptance and everyday multiculturalism.

According to Islam (2023), Japan has emerged as a transcultural society in which foreign cuisines have become an integral part of the dietary practices of younger generations, reflecting the influence of globalization, transnational cultural exchange, and greater mobility. Historical scholarship on Japanese food culture has likewise demonstrated that encounters with

foreign cuisines, ranging from Chinese and European to other Asian traditions, have long contributed to the development of Japanese gastronomy through processes of adaptation, hybridization, and cultural appropriation.

Recent research has further shown that Japanese consumers, particularly younger generations, exhibit growing openness toward foreign cuisines. Using Vietnamese cuisine as a case study, Dinh (2023) found that Japanese young people's openness to ethnic foods is associated with their interest in Vietnamese culture, willingness to experience novel cuisines, and opportunities for intercultural interaction. Such findings suggest that the expansion of ethnic restaurants in Japan is influenced not only by migrant populations but also by changing consumer attitudes toward cultural diversity. Together, these studies indicate that ethnic restaurants operate within a dynamic interaction between migration, multicultural consumption, and cultural openness.

The growing popularity of foreign cuisines has frequently been interpreted through the concept of food cosmopolitanism. Food cosmopolitanism refers to the willingness of consumers to engage with culinary traditions originating from different cultural contexts and to incorporate such experiences into everyday consumption practices. Rather than being limited to physical mobility, cosmopolitanism may be expressed through routine encounters with foreign foods, restaurants, and culinary cultures. Through food consumption, individuals symbolically participate in global cultural flows while constructing identities associated with openness, curiosity, and cultural competence. In this sense, cuisine can function not merely as a form of consumption but also as a medium of cultural interaction through which communities negotiate identity and respond to global cultural influences (Fatimah & Panjaitan, 2025).

Within contemporary urban societies, ethnic restaurants provide important spaces through which cosmopolitan dispositions are cultivated and performed. Consumers are often attracted not only by taste but also by opportunities to experience cultural difference in accessible and pleasurable forms. As a result, the consumption of foreign cuisines can function simultaneously as leisure, cultural learning, and symbolic participation in multicultural urban life. In the Japanese context, the increasing visibility of Southeast Asian cuisines may therefore be understood as part of broader processes of culinary cosmopolitanization that encourage engagement with cultural diversity through food.

While cosmopolitan consumption may encourage openness toward foreign cultures, it does not necessarily eliminate unequal cultural representations. Postcolonial scholars have long argued that cultural others are frequently represented through processes of exoticization that emphasize difference, mystery, and authenticity. (Said, 1978) concept of Orientalism helps explain how non-Western cultures are represented as culturally distinctive and consumable, while remaining symbolically positioned as different from the dominant culture.. Although Said's analysis focused primarily on the Middle East, subsequent scholars have applied similar perspectives to the representation and consumption of non-Western cultures in broader global contexts.

Building on this perspective, (Hooks, 1992) argues that cultural difference often becomes an object of consumption within contemporary capitalist societies, where the "Other" is commodified and transformed into a source of pleasure, novelty, and symbolic distinction. Similarly, Huggan (2001) demonstrates how exoticism functions not merely as a representation of difference but also as a marketable cultural commodity. In this sense, exoticism should be

understood not as an inherent quality of a culture itself, but as a social process through which cultural difference is selectively produced, packaged, and consumed.

Within food studies, Johnston and Baumann (2010) argue that contemporary consumers negotiate between cosmopolitan openness and the search for authenticity. Foreign cuisines are valued for offering experiences perceived as both culturally authentic and sufficiently different from everyday consumption, placing ethnic restaurants in an ambivalent position: they can foster intercultural understanding while simultaneously reproducing symbolic hierarchies of cultural difference. In Japan, this tension is evident in the reception of Southeast Asian cuisines, whose visibility and popularity are shaped not only by consumer openness but also by their representation within broader cultural imaginaries. Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines are therefore encountered as both food and symbolic markers of authenticity, cultural difference, and exotic appeal.

Nevertheless, existing studies on ethnic restaurants in Japan have predominantly examined migration, menu adaptation, and marketing strategies, while cultural representation and symbolic consumption—particularly concerning Mainland Southeast Asia—remain underexplored. This study addresses this gap by mapping Mainland Southeast Asian restaurants in Japan, analyzing their cultural representation strategies, and examining how culinary openness and exoticism shape the reception of Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines within Japan's contemporary multicultural foodscape.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-comparative approach, utilizing content analysis and digital mapping as its primary analytical strategies. The data sources are divided into two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through online observation and spatial mapping. Online observation involved examining restaurant profiles across digital platforms, including Google Maps, Tabelog, Gurunavi, Retty, and TripAdvisor, as well as official restaurant websites and social media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter/X). This process included analyzing menu photographs, interior designs, promotional materials, and documentation of special events uploaded by both restaurant operators and customers. Spatial mapping was conducted by identifying restaurant coordinates and distribution patterns across Japan using Google Maps, alongside reviewing ratings, number of reviews, and frequently occurring keywords within customer feedback. Secondary data were obtained from academic literature, including journal articles, books, and conference proceedings related to Southeast Asian cuisine in Japan, culinary exoticism, and food studies more broadly. Additional sources included Japanese news articles and media reports covering Southeast Asian restaurants and culinary trends. Official statistical data such as the *Statistical Handbook of Japan*, tourism and migration data from the Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), and reports from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications were also utilized. Previous studies on ethnic restaurants in Japan and research on culinary cultural diplomacy further informed the secondary data corpus.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Sampling strategy

Restaurants were selected using purposive sampling. Only restaurants that explicitly identified themselves as Cambodian, Lao, Myanmar, Thai, or Vietnamese restaurants on Google Maps and maintained an active business profile were included in the dataset. Permanently closed restaurants, duplicate listings, mixed Asian restaurants were excluded.

2.2.2 *Scope of data*

Data were collected between June 2024 until June 2025 from Google Maps, restaurant websites, Facebook pages, Instagram accounts, and publicly accessible secondary sources. The geographical scope covered all prefectures of Japan.

2.2.3 *Technical definition of digital methods*

Digital mapping refers to the systematic identification and geographical visualization of restaurant locations using Google Maps. Restaurant searches were conducted using standardized keywords in both English and Japanese, including "Cambodian restaurant", "Lao restaurant", "Myanmar restaurant", "Thai restaurant", and "Vietnamese restaurant". Search results were manually verified to remove duplicate entries and permanently closed establishments.

2.3 **Data Analysis**

The study combines descriptive spatial analysis with qualitative content analysis. Mapping was used to identify the geographical distribution and relative visibility of each cuisine, followed by qualitative analysis of how restaurants represented cultural identity through menus, promotional narratives, visual imagery, websites, and social media. In this study, “dominance” refers to the relative visibility of a national cuisine within Japan’s ethnic restaurant landscape, operationalized through the number and geographical distribution of establishments and their representation in media and cultural events; it does not imply cultural superiority. The primary unit of analysis was the restaurant establishment, supplemented by restaurant websites, menus, promotional materials, social media, and related media publications. Thematic coding identified recurring themes concerning migration, historical connections, cultural heritage, Buddhism, authenticity, tourism, and exoticism, which were subsequently interpreted through food studies and postcolonial perspectives.

3. **Result and Discussion**

The findings reveal a clear hierarchy in the visibility of Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines within Japan. Thai and Vietnamese restaurants demonstrate substantial market presence and geographical dispersion, whereas Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar restaurants remain comparatively limited in number and concentrated in major metropolitan areas. This pattern suggests that culinary visibility is shaped not solely by migration size but also by historical connections, cultural familiarity, symbolic representations, and market adaptation strategies.

The results indicate that the reception of Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines in Japan operates through the interaction of three interconnected factors: (1) migration and demographic infrastructure, (2) historical and cultural connections between Japan and the country of origin, and (3) symbolic representations that influence public familiarity and culinary appeal. The following sections discuss how these factors contribute to the unequal visibility of Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines within Japan’s multicultural foodscape.

3.1 Factors Influencing the Emergence of Cambodia, Lao and Myanmar Restaurants in Japan

3.1.1 Growth of Migran Communities

Japan began to emerge as a significant destination for migrants, particularly foreign workers, starting in the early 1990s. This shift was largely driven by revisions to immigration legislation and the growing demand for labor resulting from rapid population aging and demographic decline. Structural labor shortages in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, caregiving, and services prompted the government to gradually expand channels for foreign employment. Recent official statistics further illustrate Japan's increasing social diversity. As of the end of October 2025, the number of foreign workers reached 2,571,037, representing an 11.7% year-on-year increase and the highest figure since the reporting system was introduced in 2007 (*Recent Statistical Survey Reports*, 2026). Foreign workers now account for approximately 4.1% of Japan's total employed workforce. The number of workplaces employing at least one non-Japanese worker also rose to a record 371,000, the highest figure since the government began tracking such data in 2007. These figures underscore the growing institutional and economic incorporation of migrant labor into Japan's labor market, reinforcing the country's gradual transformation into a more structurally multicultural society.

Table 1 indicates marked demographic differences among Mainland Southeast Asian communities in Japan. Myanmar accounts for the largest resident population, followed by Cambodia and Laos. Although migrant population size provides an important structural condition for the development of ethnic businesses, it does not automatically translate into equal cultural visibility. As the following analysis demonstrates, the distribution and recognition of Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar restaurants are influenced not only by demographic factors but also by historical relationships, cultural familiarity, and processes of exoticization that shape consumer perceptions in Japan. Migrant communities in Japan exert a substantial influence on the presence and development of foreign restaurants. As reflected in the table 2, Thai and Vietnamese restaurants rank highest in number, reaching several hundred establishments nationwide, whereas Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar restaurants remain limited to fewer than fifty outlets, indeed, in the cases of Cambodia and Laos, fewer than fifteen.

Table 1 Number of Mainland SEA Residents in Japan

Source: MOA, MOJ, Immigration Service Agency (June 2024-June 2025)

Nationality	Number	Reference Date
Vietnam	634,361	End of 2024
Myanmar	134,574	End of 2024
Thailand	66,624	June 2025
Cambodia	25, 364	June 2024
Laos	4, 205	June 2025

Table 2 Number of Mainland SEA Restaurant in Japan

Source: Tabelog Listing for Tokyo and Osaka

Restaurant	Tokyo	Osaka
Thai	~860	~145
Vietnam	~344	~162
Cambodia	Very small (3-10)	Very small (0-3)
Lao	Very small (2-8)	Very small (0-3)
Myanmar	Small but visible (15-40)	Very small (5-15)

Nevertheless, the numerical presence of foreign restaurants does not always correspond directly to the size of the migrant population. Myanmar, for instance, represents one of the largest Southeast Asian migrant groups in Japan (second only to Thailand) yet the number of Myanmar restaurants remains comparatively modest. Moreover, not all foreign restaurants are operated by nationals of the respective countries; Japanese entrepreneurs and other non-nationals also participate in the establishment of such businesses. In this study, “foreign restaurants” refer to establishments that serve non-Japanese national cuisines, regardless of the owner’s nationality.

For diaspora communities, foreign restaurants serve as community hubs for cultural preservation, economic mobility, and the circulation of ethnic ingredients. While larger migrant communities such as Thai and Vietnamese tend to support more restaurants, smaller Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar communities correspond to fewer establishments. Restaurant distribution, however, is shaped not only by demographic size but also by entrepreneurial capital, regulatory conditions, consumer demand, and the symbolic positioning of each cuisine within Japan’s culinary hierarchy.

Japanese immigration policies and labor programs further shape the demographic foundations of foreign restaurant sectors. The *Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)* has contributed to the presence of Southeast Asian workers, particularly from Vietnam and Myanmar, while the *Specified Skilled Worker (SSW)* visa introduced in 2019 has facilitated labor migration in sectors including food service, caregiving, construction, and manufacturing. Student visas, internship schemes, and refugee-related migration pathways, particularly for Myanmar nationals, have also contributed to the composition of Mainland Southeast Asian communities. As migrant workers and students settle around workplaces, educational institutions, and affordable residential areas, localized communities emerge and generate demand for culturally specific goods and services, including restaurants. Foreign restaurants thus function as both economic ventures and community infrastructure, while migration governance indirectly shapes their development by sustaining migrant inflows and transforming Japan’s multicultural urban foodscape.

3.1.2 Low Barriers to Entry in the Ethnic Restaurant Industry

Foreign restaurants in Japan benefit from several structural and cultural advantages that support their sustainability within competitive urban markets. Among these are the reliance on family recipes, niche market positioning with relatively limited competition, consumer curiosity toward “authentic” foreign cuisines, and comparatively moderate operational costs. The use of family recipes constitutes a significant asset, as culinary knowledge can be transmitted informally across generations without requiring formal professional training or costly culinary certification. This intergenerational transfer of embodied knowledge reduces start-up expenses while simultaneously reinforcing claims of authenticity, an important symbolic resource in the ethnic restaurant sector.

In addition, many foreign restaurants strategically occupy niche market segments where direct competition remains limited, particularly in the case of less represented cuisines such as those from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar. Consumer curiosity toward unfamiliar yet “authentic” flavors further enhances their appeal, as dining becomes not only an act of consumption but also an experiential engagement with cultural difference. Operational costs can also remain relatively moderate when such establishments utilize compact spaces, simplified interior designs, and family-based labor arrangements. By operating in small-scale venues (often located in secondary urban districts or multi-tenant buildings) these restaurants

are able to minimize rent and overhead expenses, thereby increasing their resilience in fluctuating market conditions. More importantly, in practice, these conditions allow migrant restaurateurs to transform culinary knowledge into sustainable small businesses, even within Japan's highly competitive urban market.

3.1.3 *Historical and Symbolic Connections*

Although more limited in scale than Thailand and Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar maintain distinct historical ties with Japan that have contributed to layers of symbolic familiarity facilitating the introduction of their cuisines. These encounters, shaped by wartime contact, development cooperation, and cultural exchange, have created frameworks of recognition through which their food cultures are not perceived as entirely foreign within the Japanese imagination. Since the 1990s, successive waves of enthusiasm for ethnic cuisine, particularly Thai and Vietnamese food, have reflected a broader expansion of culinary openness in Japan's urban consumption landscape. This trend corresponds not only to changing tastes but also to lifestyles increasingly oriented toward global and cosmopolitan imaginaries. The established popularity of Thai and Vietnamese cuisine has consequently created pathways through which less familiar Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines can enter the Japanese market. Japanese consumers' interest in novelty and perceived authenticity or exoticism, together with culinary media's framing of unfamiliar dishes as part of a cosmopolitan repertoire, has further expanded this space. Such dynamics resonate with Fischler's (1988) argument that foreign food consumption contributes to identity construction and social differentiation, as well as Heldke's (2015) notion of "adventure eating" within culinary cosmopolitanism. In Japan, this openness has developed alongside the modernization and globalization of the national food system (Cwiertka, 2006; C. Bestor & Lyon Bestor, 2011).

Historical relationships, however, have produced different forms of symbolic familiarity. Myanmar occupies a distinctive place in Japan's historical memory due to wartime involvement in Burma during World War II and subsequent bilateral relations, contributing to enduring cultural representations of Burma in Japanese society (Strefford, 2010). Cambodia and Laos, by contrast, have been connected with Japan primarily through postwar ODA, agricultural cooperation, infrastructure development, and cultural exchange (Potter & Kim, 2018). Shared imaginaries of agrarian Buddhist societies and rice-based cultural traditions may further generate symbolic resonance, positioning these cuisines within an Asian framework that is simultaneously familiar and exotic. Their reception in Japan is therefore shaped not only by market demand but also by historical memories and symbolic associations that influence how consumers encounter and imagine Mainland Southeast Asia.

3.1.4 *The Rise of Japan's "Ethnic Food" Boom and Culinary Curiosity*

Since the 1990s, Japan has experienced several waves of enthusiasm for ethnic cuisine, particularly Thai and Vietnamese food, signaling an expansion of culinary openness within urban consumption landscapes. This shift is not simply about taste. It signals a broader transformation in lifestyle, one increasingly shaped by cosmopolitan aspiration and global mobility. Within this evolving context, restaurants representing Mainland Southeast Asian countries (such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar) have benefited from the structural pathways established by the earlier success of Thai and Vietnamese cuisine. Japanese consumers have shown a growing inclination toward novelty and flavor experiences perceived as authentic and

exotic, while ethnic restaurants symbolically align with middle-class ideals of global openness and cultural mobility.

Culinary media, including lifestyle magazines and food television programs, have further amplified this trend by promoting previously unfamiliar dishes as components of a cosmopolitan repertoire worthy of exploration. The interplay between consumer curiosity and media representation has thus generated social and economic opportunities for the emergence of Lao, Cambodian, and Myanmar restaurants within urban Japan. As a result, these establishments have become embedded in an increasingly dynamic and multicultural foodscape, where culinary diversity functions both as a marker of global connectivity and as a site of cultural negotiation.

3.1.5 Improved Access to Imported Ingredients

The expansion of specialty stores supplying imported ingredients has facilitated the availability of ethnic cuisines in Japan, particularly for restaurants. Stores such as Asia Superstore and Thailand Shop provide Thai, Cambodian, and Lao products, while Fuji Store and Myanmar-operated grocery outlets supply ingredients essential to Myanmar cuisine. These retail infrastructures function as ecosystem builders by simplifying ingredient sourcing, stabilizing procurement, and enabling restaurants to reproduce traditional recipes more consistently, thereby strengthening claims of culinary authenticity. They also serve a diverse customer base, including migrant communities seeking familiar tastes and Japanese consumers interested in ethnic cuisines.

The relationship between specialty stores and restaurants is reciprocal. Greater access to imported ingredients supports the establishment and sustainability of restaurants, while expanding restaurants generate demand that encourages importers and retailers to enter or expand within the market. This feedback loop—where more specialty stores enable more restaurants and greater restaurant demand attracts additional suppliers—strengthens the broader ethnic culinary ecosystem. Thus, the availability of imported ingredients represents not merely a retail function but an important infrastructural condition underlying the visibility and sustainability of foreign cuisines in Japan.

3.1.6 Influence of Media, Travel Culture, and Festivals

Media, travel culture, and culinary festivals play an important role in shaping the reception of foreign restaurants in Japan. Japanese television programs, culinary magazines, and popular culture introduce not only foreign dishes but also the cultural narratives surrounding them, allowing audiences to develop expectations before direct consumption. Manga and anime featuring Southeast Asian food cultures, as well as illustrated publications on world cuisines, similarly transform distant culinary traditions into recognizable cultural objects. Digital platforms such as YouTube and social networking services further reinforce this mediated familiarity through travel vlogs, restaurant reviews, cooking demonstrations, and influencer content. These forms of exposure provide consumers with expectations of taste, atmosphere, and authenticity before visiting a restaurant. Consequently, foreign restaurants may be perceived as “foreign yet already recognized,” lowering psychological barriers to culinary experimentation. Media therefore does not merely promote foreign restaurants but also shapes the symbolic frameworks through which they are perceived, evaluated, and incorporated into Japan’s multicultural foodscape.

As illustrated in Figures 1–3, Japanese popular media has contributed to introducing Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines to domestic audiences. While Thai and Vietnamese cuisines have been featured in manga such as *Taimeshi* (Figure 1) and *Rittoru Rootasu* (Figure 2), Myanmar cuisine has also begun to receive attention through works such as *Sekai no Okawari* (Figure 3). These publications present ethnic cuisines not merely as food but as cultural experiences associated with travel, authenticity, and everyday encounters with foreign cultures. Such media representations may enhance public familiarity and encourage culinary curiosity, thereby supporting the broader visibility of Southeast Asian cuisines in Japan.

Travel experiences, tourism booms, and cultural festivals also influence the visibility and sustainability of foreign restaurants in Japan. As outbound travel among Japanese citizens expanded, particularly from the late twentieth century onward, travelers increasingly sought to recreate tastes and sensory experiences encountered abroad. Foreign restaurants consequently function not only as dining establishments but also as mnemonic spaces that reactivate travel memories through taste, atmosphere, décor, and music, providing a form of “safe re-entry” into overseas experiences. Cultural exchange festivals similarly normalize foreign cuisines within Japanese public space. Cambodian and Lao cultural festivals held annually in Yoyogi, Tokyo, for example, provide accessible platforms for food, performances, and community engagement, potentially encouraging subsequent visits to restaurants. Myanmar-related festivals, by contrast, tend to be more sporadic, reflecting factors such as limited diaspora organizational resources, political developments, and varying support from local organizations and municipalities. Together, travel culture and festivals create temporal and affective conditions through which foreign cuisines become embedded in circuits of memory, mobility, and multicultural public life in Japan.

Figure 1 *Taimeshi* by Taarekku

Source (1): たーれっく漫画の電子書籍と子猿の近況を少し: タイでうきやうきや日記

Figure 2 *Rittoru Rootasu* by Nishiura Kio

Source (2): 「リトル・ロータス」 ベトナム料理に興味始めたところにタイムリーな漫画 ktkr! - 頭の上にミカンのをせる

Figure 3 *Sekai no Okawari*

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3.2 Culinary Openness (Food Cosmopolitanism)

The emergence of ethnic restaurants in Japan tends to be spatially concentrated in specific urban zones that structurally sustain small-scale migrant entrepreneurship. From an economic perspective, areas with relatively affordable rent, such as peripheral districts adjacent to city centers or neighborhoods characterized by older building stock, provide migrant entrepreneurs with opportunities to minimize start-up risks and operate with limited capital (Waldinger et al., 1990). Demographically, districts with large immigrant and ethnic populations provide a stable consumer base while fostering social networks that support entrepreneurial activities (Light & Gold, n.d.). In the Japanese context, neighborhoods surrounding universities, industrial zones, and major railway stations often function as strategic sites due to their high public visibility and steady pedestrian flows, which increase exposure and the likelihood of spontaneous customers. The presence of international students and foreign workers not only sustains demand for “comfort food” associated with home-country cuisines but also stimulates curiosity among local Japanese consumers seeking experiences framed as authentic and culturally distinctive. Consequently, the spatial distribution of ethnic restaurants reflects an interaction among economic factors (rental affordability), demographic factors (migrant concentration), and symbolic factors (public visibility and spatial legitimacy). Together, these dimensions shape the ecology of migrant entrepreneurship within Japan’s urban landscape, embedding ethnic restaurants within broader patterns of urban multicultural transformation.

3.3 Culinary Image and Connection to Japan

3.3.1 Cambodia

One of the most significant symbols of Japan–Cambodia connection is Japan’s participation in the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in the early 1990s. Under the framework of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and its predecessor UNAMIC, Japan dispatched personnel from the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) to Cambodia. This marked the first overseas deployment of Japanese ground forces since World War II and was made possible by post–Gulf War policy changes that redefined Japan’s international security role. The mission focused on supporting Cambodia’s democratic transition and post-conflict stabilization. According to (Yamamoto, 2015), capable officers and soldiers participating in the PKO were able to establish warm and cooperative relationships with local residents, and Japan’s involvement is generally regarded as a diplomatic success. As such, the PKO has become a symbolic marker of peaceful engagement and humanitarian contribution within Japan’s collective memory of Cambodia.

Beyond peacekeeping, Angkor Wat occupies a prominent place in Japanese cultural consciousness through long-standing academic and heritage preservation projects. Such engagements reinforce symbolic associations between Cambodia and narratives of cultural heritage, international cooperation, and historical preservation. Such symbolic connections (PKO as a peace-building emblem and Angkor Wat as a civilizational icon) contribute to the cultural framing through which Cambodia is perceived in Japan. This symbolic familiarity intersects with the presence of Cambodian restaurants in Japan. Notably, restaurants bearing the name “Angkor Wat” in Tokyo, as well as establishments such as Bayon Khmer, Angkor Thom (Tokyo), Shijo Pakuchi (Kyoto), and Nyamunyanu Shokudō (Osaka), explicitly draw upon Angkor-related imagery in their branding. Representative dishes commonly served include *amok* (steamed fish curry), widely regarded as one of Cambodia’s national dishes.

Through such naming practices and culinary representations, Cambodian restaurants in Japan mobilize established cultural symbols (peacekeeping diplomacy and Angkorian heritage) to create recognizable yet distinct identities within Japan's multicultural foodscape.

3.3.2 Laos

Laos is a predominantly Theravada Buddhist society, with Buddhism forming a central component of national cultural identity (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Given these historical and cultural linkages, Laos may be understood as sharing a *shared Buddhist aesthetic* with Japan. By this term, I refer to overlapping symbolic, visual, and atmospheric elements rooted in Buddhist traditions that are perceived as relatively familiar within Japanese cultural sensibilities. The relationship between Japan and Laos has also been significantly reflected in the framework of Official Development Assistance (ODA), which has been ongoing since the 1990s. Since the 1990s, Japan has maintained extensive development cooperation with Laos through ODA programs in infrastructure, agriculture, and human resource development. These long-term exchanges have contributed to positive perceptions of Japan and strengthened bilateral connections (Arase, 1995). Consequently, historical connectivity through ODA contributes to a cultural foundation that may facilitate the reception of Lao cultural elements (including cuisine) within Japan's public sphere, as these are framed within a narrative of harmonious and development-oriented partnership.

In Japan, a number of Lao restaurants operate in conjunction with Thai establishments, reflecting both culinary proximity and market strategy. Examples in Tokyo include Sabaidee Thai & Laos Cuisine (Koenji), Sabaidee, Vientiane, and Lan Sang, while in Kyoto restaurants such as Yulala and Khanty incorporate Lao culinary offerings. Representative dishes commonly served include *khao niew* (sticky rice), a staple of Lao food culture, and *khao piak sen* (rice noodle soup), which highlights the centrality of rice-based ingredients. The frequent pairing of Lao and Thai cuisines within a single establishment underscores both their regional affinity and the pragmatic adaptation of Lao culinary identity within Japan's existing Thai-dominated Southeast Asian restaurant market.

3.3.3 Myanmar

Burma was occupied by the Empire of Japan between 1942 and 1945 during World War II, establishing a significant historical connection between Myanmar and Japan. This wartime encounter became deeply embedded in Japan's postwar cultural memory and gave rise to various artistic representations reflecting on the conflict and its moral implications.

Table 3 The relationship between the three Mainland Southeast Asian countries and Japan within the framework of exoticism

Country	Connection to Japan	Culinary Image in Japan	Form of Exoticism
Cambodia	PKO, mission, volunteers, symbol of peace	Amok curry, Angkor pepper	Humanitarian/heritage exoticism
Laos	ODA, cultural similarities between rice and Buddhism	<i>Khao niew</i> (sticky rice), <i>khao piak sen</i> (rice noodle soup), eco simplicity	Pastoral/eco-exoticism
Myanmar	WWII, veteran nostalgia, diaspora communities	<i>Mohinga</i> , <i>Lahpet Thoke</i> , <i>Danbaw</i> , Burmese soup of Mashiko	Colonial/nostalgic exoticism

One of the most prominent works is *The Burmese Harp*, directed by Kon Ichikawa. The film portrays the experiences of Japanese soldiers in Burma and frames the country as a landscape of spiritual reflection, loss, and reconciliation. Through its pacifist narrative and evocative imagery, the film contributed to shaping a particular Japanese imagination of Burma, one that intertwines memories of war with themes of Buddhism, mourning, and human connection. Wartime memories of Burma continue to appear in Japanese local food culture. One example is “Biruma-jiru,” a curry-flavored soup in Mashiko that originated from the wartime experiences of a former Japanese soldier and has been preserved as a form of culinary remembrance (Watanabe, 2020).

As a non-dominant Mainland Southeast Asian country in Japan’s ethnic restaurant landscape, Myanmar nevertheless has a comparatively larger number of establishments than Laos and Cambodia. These restaurants are particularly concentrated in the Takadanobaba area of Shinjuku (Tokyo), an area known for its student population and multicultural environment. Notable examples include Swe Myanmar, Golden Bagan, and Nong Inlay, among others. Additional establishments can also be found in Osaka, such as Dakhin and Aung Myanmar, indicating the presence of Myanmar culinary hubs beyond the capital region.

The menus of these restaurants typically feature widely recognized Myanmar dishes, including *mohinga* (rice noodle fish soup, often regarded as Myanmar’s national dish), Shan noodles, *tofu nway* (warm chickpea tofu), and even more distinctive items such as fried crickets. The prominence of such dishes reflects both diasporic demand for familiar comfort food and an effort to introduce signature national flavors to Japanese consumers. The spatial clustering of Myanmar restaurants in specific districts suggests the formation of micro-ethnic enclaves, where culinary spaces function not only as commercial enterprises but also as social nodes for community interaction and cultural continuity.

Table 3 synthesizes the relationship between Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar and Japan from the perspective of exoticism. The table demonstrates that cultural difference alone does not determine how these cuisines are perceived. Rather, historical interactions, migration, development cooperation, and cultural exchange collectively shape varying degrees of symbolic familiarity. Consequently, the cuisines of these three countries are positioned differently within Japan’s culinary landscape, reflecting the coexistence of cosmopolitan openness and symbolic hierarchy.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the visibility and representation of Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines within Japan’s multicultural foodscape. By combining restaurant mapping, demographic analysis, and qualitative content analysis, the findings demonstrate that the presence of Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines in Japan cannot be explained solely through migration patterns or market demand. Rather, culinary visibility emerges through the interaction of demographic infrastructure, historical connections, and symbolic representations that shape public familiarity and cultural recognition.

The findings reveal a hierarchical structure within Japan’s Southeast Asian restaurant landscape. While Thai and Vietnamese cuisines have achieved relatively high levels of visibility and market integration, Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines remain comparatively marginal despite their growing presence. This hierarchy reflects differences not only in-migrant

population size but also in the availability of cultural narratives that facilitate consumer recognition and market acceptance. Historical experiences such as Japan's peacekeeping involvement in Cambodia, development cooperation with Laos, and wartime memories associated with Myanmar provide symbolic resources that contribute to the public framing of these cuisines.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to discussions of ethnic restaurants, food cosmopolitanism, and culinary exoticism. Consistent with Johnston and Baumann (2010), the findings suggest that culinary openness does not necessarily eliminate cultural hierarchy. Consumers may demonstrate curiosity toward foreign cuisines while simultaneously relying on selective representations of authenticity, familiarity, and cultural difference. In this context, Cambodian, Lao, and Myanmar cuisines are positioned through a dual process of cosmopolitan engagement and exoticization, whereby cultural difference functions both as a source of attraction and as a mechanism that limits broader visibility.

The study also contributes to research on ethnic restaurants in Japan by demonstrating that restaurant distribution should be understood not merely as an economic outcome of migration but as a sociocultural phenomenon embedded within broader historical and symbolic relationships. Ethnic restaurants operate as sites where migration, memory, diplomacy, and cultural representation intersect, producing uneven patterns of culinary recognition across different migrant communities.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The restaurant database was constructed primarily from Google Maps and therefore may not capture all existing establishments. Furthermore, this study focused on restaurant representation rather than consumer perceptions or restaurant operators' experiences. Future research could employ interviews, ethnographic observation, or consumer surveys to explore how Japanese consumers interpret and negotiate unfamiliar Southeast Asian cuisines in everyday dining practices.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the visibility of Mainland Southeast Asian cuisines in Japan is shaped not only by the movement of people but also by the circulation of historical memories, cultural symbols, and representations of difference. Understanding these processes contributes to a broader understanding of how multiculturalism is experienced, negotiated, and consumed through food in contemporary Japan.

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