

The Role of English, Chinese, and Japanese in the Tourist Business in Thailand: Opportunities and Challenges in 2025

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic roles of English, Mandarin Chinese, and Japanese in Thailand's tourism industry in 2025. Using secondary data from government statistics, tourism reports, and academic literature, the analysis considers language as an economic driver, its impact on tourist spending, and policy implications for multilingual tourism planning. Findings show that English remains the main lingua franca connecting Thailand to European markets. However, the growing purchasing power of Chinese and Japanese tourists highlights the need to invest in Mandarin and Japanese proficiency. The results indicate that even basic multilingual communication can attract high-spending tourist segments. The study concludes that a coordinated trilingual language strategy, supported by role-specific training and institutional standards, is vital to maintaining Thailand's competitiveness in the global tourism economy.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), Japanese tourism market recovery, Mandarin language services, multilingual tourism strategy, Thailand tourism economy 2025

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Analytical Approach

This review examines how language is used in Thailand's tourism industry, drawing on government statistics, tourism reports, and academic studies. This review explores three main questions: How do English, Chinese, and Japanese serve as economic and cultural tools in Thailand's tourism sector? How do these languages affect tourist experiences and spending? What policy and training steps can improve multilingual communication in Thai tourism? The discussion uses data like tourist arrivals and spending trends, but focuses more on policy and strategy than on new research. The analysis relies on official statistics, comparisons with other countries in the region, and a summary of the roles of English, Chinese, and Japanese in tourism.

Multilingualism is important for Thailand's tourism sector. Languages help expand market access and boost revenue. Grin (2001) and other researchers argue that languages facilitate communication, support business, and affect how tourists spend. In Thailand, English, Mandarin, and Japanese each play different roles. English connects Thailand with European and international visitors. Mandarin brings in tourists from China's large outbound market. Japan attracts high-spending travelers seeking unique cultural experiences. Together, these languages play a big part in Thailand's tourism industry.

English remains the primary language for cross-cultural communication in Thai tourism, enabling tourists and service providers to interact. Thailand is now also investing in Mandarin and Japanese. By offering more languages, Thailand can reach more tourists and depend less on just one language. This approach aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) notion of "linguistic capital": offering more languages increases the likelihood of attracting both new and returning tourists.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on three theoretical perspectives. First, English as a Lingua Franca, described by Seidlhofer (2004) and Jenkins (2007), sees English as a shared communicative tool among multilingual speakers rather than a native-speaker standard. In Thai tourism, ELF shows how English helps communication between Thai service providers and tourists from various linguistic backgrounds. Second, Bourdieu's (1991) theory of linguistic capital views language proficiency as social and economic capital. In tourism, linguistic capital provides direct access to markets, revenue, and competitive advantage. Third, language economics (Grin, 2001) treats language policy as an investment with measurable returns. In Thailand, this perspective supports investing in Mandarin and Japanese language training for public and private sectors.

Research Objective and Methodology

This study examines the strategic use of English, Chinese, and Japanese in Thailand's 2025 tourism industry, highlighting opportunities and challenges for businesses and policymakers. It

focuses on three questions: how these languages serve as economic and cultural tools, how they affect tourist experiences and spending by nationality, and what policy and training needs arise from Thailand's multilingual tourism.

The article draws on government statistics, official tourism reports, and academic studies, using tourist arrival figures and spending trends to provide economic context. The analysis applies three approaches: descriptive statistical synthesis of arrival and spending data, comparative regional analysis of Thailand's language environment, and thematic synthesis of how English, Chinese, and Japanese drive revenue, foster cultural engagement, and encourage repeat visits.

Language Proficiency and Economic Performance

Thailand's tourism success depends on visitor numbers and communication between service providers and tourists. Higher English proficiency among hospitality staff leads to greater tourist satisfaction, longer stays, and increased spending. Empirical data confirm this: European visitors, who primarily use English, generated approximately 896 billion baht in 2025, showing their spending power and the value of English-language service.

Chinese tourists spend about 42,428 baht per trip. Businesses with Mandarin-speaking staff or Mandarin-enabled digital platforms capture more of this market. The same trend applies to Japanese tourists. When Japanese-language services are offered, visitation frequency and length of stay increase, resulting in higher revenue for local businesses. Language skills directly impact economic outcomes.

Language proficiency enhances communication and drives economic growth. When service workers speak tourists' languages, transactions become more efficient, trust grows, and spending extends to hotels, retail, cultural sites, and local restaurants. Thailand's low English proficiency causes missed opportunities. Targeted training can increase revenue from European markets. Investing in Mandarin and Japanese services is a strategic way to attract high-spending visitors from China and Japan. Language proficiency should be central to Thailand's tourism strategy.

English language for the Tourist Business in Thailand 2025

1. English language for the Tourist Business in Bangkok

Bangkok is a major destination for European tourists. While most Europeans recognize Bangkok as part of Thailand, fewer know other provinces. The Tourism and Sport Ministry expects about 8 million European visitors in Bangkok in 2025 (Molpasorn, 2024). This creates significant opportunities for tourism businesses in Thailand. In 2024, Bangkok received 32.40 million international tourists who spent 1,223 billion baht, an 11.4% increase from 2023. In April 2025 alone, 9.07 million arrivals were recorded, showing the difference between annual and monthly figures (RoadGenius, 2025).

European tourists typically stay in Thailand longer than other visitors, mainly for leisure activities like relaxation, recreation, and cultural sightseeing. According to Nation Thailand (2025), they spend heavily on premium experiences, including luxury hotels, resorts, and dining, benefiting the Thai economy. In 2025, European tourists are expected to generate 896 billion baht, highlighting their preference for high-end services. This trend creates opportunities for tourism businesses. To capitalize on this market, English proficiency is essential. Businesses without strong English skills risk missing key opportunities and limiting revenue.

The EF English Proficiency Index (2024) ranks Thailand 106th out of 116 Asian countries for English proficiency. Although few Thai people are fluent, many can communicate with European tourists. Greater government investment in advanced English training for the tourism sector could attract more European visitors, increase revenue, and strengthen the economy.

Singapore's status as an official English-speaking country, supported by long-standing government policy, results in higher English proficiency than Thailand. This makes Singapore highly accessible to European tourists. Singapore consistently ranks at the top for English proficiency in Asia (EF, 2024). European visitors have contributed over 30 million Singaporean dollars to the local economy (Alan, 2025).

Comparative benchmarking shows Thailand's English proficiency is weaker than Singapore's. Porter's Competitive Advantage model suggests Singapore's use of English as an official language gives it a structural advantage in attracting European tourists. Thailand's low ranking in the EF English Proficiency Index represents a significant opportunity cost. Without investment in advanced English skills, Thailand risks losing high-value European tourists to regional competitors. A SWOT analysis confirms limited English proficiency will hinder Thailand's ability to attract high-value German and British visitors.

2. German Tourists in Thailand

European tourism to Thailand remains strong. From January 1 to March 31, the leading European source countries were Germany with 341,242 visitors, the United Kingdom with 335,116, and France with 315,116. Russia contributed 877,516 visitors during the same period (Nation Thailand, 2025). Germans have consistently been the largest group of European tourists, followed by the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, and Spain (Government Public Relations Department, 2025).

In 2024, nearly 1 million German tourists visited Thailand, contributing 65 billion baht. In Q1 2025, arrivals from Germany reached 341,242, confirming their position as the largest European group (Pattaya Mail, 2024). German tourists are a valuable repeat-client segment. Most visitors do not speak Thai. English is the primary language in the Thai tourism sector for international guests, including Germans, because Thai-German services are limited. For example, a German

tourist in Phuket may book a diving tour where the guide communicates in English to ensure safety and satisfaction. English proficiency is higher in major cities such as Bangkok, Phuket, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai, especially among younger workers and professionals. In rural areas, English is less common, though basic terms are often used in tourist locations. English allows German tourists to join a wider range of activities, including guided tours, spa treatments, medical tourism, and cultural excursions. This trend has led to higher spending. According to TAT (2024), average spending per tourist rose to 50,900 baht per trip in 2023, showing a premium preference among European tourists. Increased spending benefits local supply chains. In 2025, German visitors grew by 71%, driving European market expansion and supporting revenue during Thailand's slower months (Khaosod, 2025). German tourism significantly contributes to Thailand's transition toward high-value, sustainable growth and complements other long-haul markets.

3. French Tourists in Thailand

French tourists are attracted to Thailand's landmarks, vibrant cities, and boutique luxury experiences. Although French is their native language, most use English to communicate in hospitality, transportation, and retail. English enables smoother interactions, supports tourism revenue, and encourages broader cultural and educational engagement. French visitors contribute to Thailand's tourism through short and extended stays, with their spending part of the 2 trillion baht generated annually by international visitors (Bank of Thailand, 2024).

According to Thammakhan (2024), English is essential to Thailand's economic and educational growth. It supports tourism and commerce by helping Thai businesses serve foreign visitors, including the French. English proficiency among staff in restaurants, hotels, and tour operations improves customer satisfaction and encourages repeat business and referrals. This demand for English-speaking staff increases training and hiring, especially in tourist regions.

French engagement with Thai culture goes beyond tourism. Many French citizens visit for education, research, and volunteer work. These activities usually occur in English, the main language in Thai institutions and international programs.

French visitors contribute to high-end tourism and Thailand's intellectual and cultural landscape. Their involvement in joint research, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchange highlights English as a shared medium and distinguishes French engagement from other European groups.

4. British tourists in Thailand

British tourists are a key segment of Thailand's tourism sector and economic growth. In 2024, international tourism receipts were projected at 1.5 trillion baht, with British visitors accounting for a significant share (PRD Thailand, 2024). While 2024 data is pending, the UK was the eighth

largest source of tourists in April 2023, with nearly 70,000 arrivals (PRD Thailand, 2023). British visitors support the economy by spending on hotels, dining, travel, and souvenirs.

English is essential for supporting British tourism and maximizing its economic benefits in Thailand. As the international language for many travelers, including those from the UK, English enables Thai hotel and tourism staff to understand customer needs, provide information, and resolve complaints. This enhances service quality and increases tourist satisfaction, repeat visits, and positive word of mouth. Beyond direct customer interaction, English is essential for tourism operations such as international tour agencies, online reservation management, and marketing to global clients. Effective English communication by Thai tourism organizations is crucial to attract and welcome international visitors (Chamnankit, 2015).

In Thailand, English proficiency is often required for career advancement in tourism, particularly for front-of-house staff, guides, and managers (Jantira, 2022). This demand drives investment in language education and supports human capital development.

British tourists play a significant role in Thailand's tourism economy by visiting popular coastal resorts and cultural cities. Their spending generates multiplier effects and supports jobs across sectors. The widespread use of English improves service quality, increases efficiency, and is essential for local business operations. Thailand's tourism industry success depends on both British tourists' spending and the English proficiency of service providers.

5. Spanish tourists in Thailand

Although Spain has lower English proficiency than many EU nations, younger Spanish tourists and professionals are taught functional English. This helps them communicate in Thailand's tourist market. According to EF Education First, Spain's English proficiency in 2025 is moderate. Spain ranks 33rd with a score of 535. It shares the same band as Italy and South Korea, with about 35-55% of the population having functional English skills, especially in urban centers and among younger people.

Spanish tourists use English to communicate with Thai service staff and navigate the country's multilingual tourism infrastructure (World Population Review, 2025). Most Thai tourism staff have sufficient English skills to serve European visitors, allowing Spanish tourists to engage with Thai culture. In 2025, Spanish tourists are projected to make up 1.2–1.5% of total arrivals, contributing 19–24 billion baht in revenue. Their spending covers accommodation, food, transport, entertainment, and retail. English streamlines transactions and reduces the need for Spanish-language resources, lowering operational costs for Thai businesses. As the main communication channel, English supports effective engagement between Spanish visitors and local providers.

6. Russian tourists in Thailand

Russia is an increasingly important source market for Thai tourism. In 2024, Thailand welcomed 1.9 million Russian tourists who spent an average of 62,000 baht each, generating 124 billion baht in revenue (Molpasorn, 2024). The number of Russian visitors is projected to reach 2.2 million in 2025, driven by Thailand's 60-day visa-free policy and improved air connectivity to Bangkok and Phuket. In the first half of 2024, over 920,000 Russian tourists visited Thailand, making them the fifth-largest nationality of foreign visitors (Bangkok Post, 2024).

English proficiency is vital to Thailand's tourism sector, especially when serving non-Thai-speaking visitors like Russians. Thitivesa & Siraphatthada (2020) found that English skills improve tourist satisfaction, communication, and understanding, boosting appeal and return visits. Most Russian tourists do not speak Thai and prefer English. Limited English skills among Thai workers cause frustration and reduce tourist spending. In 2023, over 370,000 Russian tourists visited Thailand, mainly in seaside provinces such as Koh Samui and Phuket. English-language services supported this growth and generated billions of baht for the economy. For example, Russian tourists contributed 1.33 billion baht to Koh Samui's economy in January 2023. Without English as a common language, tourism's economic benefits would decline significantly.

Chinese and Japanese tourists in Thailand

1. Chinese Tourists in Thailand

The Chinese market is best evaluated through demand and supply analysis. Hiring Mandarin-speaking staff reduces communication barriers and increases tourist numbers and spending. Chinese tourists spend 42,428 baht per trip, making the effect of Mandarin-speaking staff substantial. The Japanese market benefits from a segmentation strategy. Although smaller, Japanese tourists are more likely to return to Thailand. Thailand competes with Vietnam and Malaysia for these visitors. Investing in Japanese language skills can yield a strong return.

Thailand's visa-free policy led to 6.7 million Chinese arrivals in 2024, nearly 20% of all foreign visitors (Nation Thailand, 2024). This increase was driven by visa-free access and peak season travel, especially during Chinese New Year (Kasikorn Research Center, 2024). Chinese tourists contributed significantly to Thailand's 1.5 trillion baht in tourism receipts. By mid-2025, arrivals dropped to 2.26 million, a 34% decrease from the same period in 2024 (Thaiger, 2025). The annual forecast was revised to 4.6–5 million, with potential to reach 6 million if promotional campaigns succeed. The decline results from higher travel costs, a weaker yuan, negative media coverage, safety concerns, and shifting preferences toward Japan and Vietnam. Vietnam has expanded Mandarin-language services and surpassed Thailand as the preferred destination for Chinese tourists.

English is the primary language in Thailand's international tourism sector, supporting communication for Chinese tourists in hotels, airports, and on digital platforms. English-speaking staff enhance visitor satisfaction, leading to longer stays and increased spending (Tiansoodeenon

et al., 2023). English booking apps, menus, and signage also improve accessibility for Chinese tourists.

Mandarin is vital for attracting and retaining Chinese tourists, who accounted for over 6.7 million arrivals in 2024. Most Chinese tourists prefer Mandarin over English. Thai tourism businesses with Chinese-speaking staff, signage, and digital platforms report higher customer satisfaction and spending. Chinese tourists spend an average of 42,428 baht per trip, significantly more than other regional visitors. Improved language accessibility reduces miscommunication, builds consumer confidence, and encourages greater use of local services such as retail, dining, and guided tours. Chinese-language interfaces on applications, websites, and QR-based payment systems like Alipay and WeChat Pay simplify transactions and increase comfort for Chinese travelers. Mandarin-language infrastructure is essential for Thailand's tourism sector. Investing in Mandarin proficiency helps Thailand attract more Chinese tourists, encourage repeat visits, and strengthen its position in the international tourism market.

2. Japanese tourists in Thailand

Japanese tourist arrivals to Thailand rebounded in 2024 and 2025, reflecting renewed outbound travel and Thailand's appeal. Puntid (2023) reports 805,768 Japanese tourists visited in 2023. By August 2025, arrivals reached 668,221. Projections indicate the total will surpass 1 million by December 2025. TAT expects this milestone for the Japan inbound market. In June 2025, 64,989 Japanese visitors arrived, a 13.3% increase from June 2024, according to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2025). These figures highlight the strong recovery of Japanese outbound travel and Thailand's sustained popularity.

English is a vital communication bridge between Thai service providers and Japanese tourists, who often prefer English as their second language when traveling. As the primary language for cross-cultural interaction in Thailand's tourism sectors, especially hospitality, aviation, and retail (Tiansoodeenon et al., 2023), English proficiency improves service quality, increases tourist satisfaction, and encourages repeat visits. These factors support economic growth. Tourists favor destinations where communication is straightforward. Limited English skills among Thai workers have caused negative perceptions and lost economic opportunities. Japanese tourists especially value English-speaking staff for high-quality service and clear communication. The growing presence of English-speaking tour guides and bilingual signage in major destinations such as Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket reflects this demand. Companies that invest in English training for employees report higher customer satisfaction and increased revenue from foreign tourists, including Japanese visitors.

Offering Japanese-speaking staff, signage, and services helps Thai hospitality and tourism businesses provide a more comfortable and personalized experience for Japanese tourists. This results in higher satisfaction, longer stays, and increased spending, directly supporting local

revenue growth (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2024). In Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket, operators offering Japanese-language assistance report more repeat guests and better feedback from Japanese visitors. This focus is timely because Thailand aims to attract over 1 million Japanese tourists by the end of 2025. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports set this target to reach its 3.5 trillion-baht tourism revenue goal (Post Reporters, 2024).

Japanese language services help Thailand compete more effectively with other Southeast Asian destinations targeting Japanese visitors. As Japan's population ages and interest in wellness, culture, and family holidays grows, Thai businesses that meet these needs can attract niche segments like Gen Y and Gen Z travelers, mother-child groups, and senior tourists.

Investing in Japanese language services enhances the experience for Japanese travelers and strengthens Thailand's position as a destination, supporting long-term tourism economic growth. Chinese and Japanese tourists are vital to Thailand's tourism strategy, though their market dynamics and language needs differ. The Chinese market is larger, with 6.7 million arrivals in 2024, nearly 20% of all foreign visitors. The Japanese market is smaller but recovering. It is projected to surpass 1 million arrivals by the end of 2025.

Conclusion

In Thailand's 2025 tourism, English, Chinese, and Japanese each offer distinct advantages and challenges. English remains the main language for international communication, especially with European visitors, supporting Thailand's global appeal. Although English proficiency is low, practical English skills drive economic growth, particularly in high-end markets serving English, French, German, Spanish, and Russian tourists.

Outbound tourism from China and Japan is rising. Mandarin is essential for companies targeting the large Chinese market. Likewise, Japanese language support will help Thailand attract Japanese visitors with tailored services.

These three languages offer significant opportunities. English supports Thailand's traditional European and global markets. Chinese and Japanese attract the growing middle class and high-spending tourists from Asia. The key challenge is investing in language training that builds practical communication skills for tourism staff. Effective language promotion will help Thailand sustain revenue, diversify its visitor base, and enhance its reputation as an open and adaptable destination.

Tourism personnel need language training tailored to their roles, not generic instruction. Front-line staff should be prepared for guest check-in, guided tours, safety briefings, and complaint resolution. The goal is practical communicative competence, not general fluency. Training should address the distinct language needs of front desk staff, tour guides, and managers.

English training should focus on service-oriented communication to help staff assess and meet guest needs, especially European and Russian visitors. Mandarin training should emphasize digital skills, including using Chinese payment platforms and booking applications. Training for Japanese tourists should prepare staff for nuanced, context-sensitive communication to meet cultural expectations.

Effective implementation requires collaboration among key stakeholders: tourism authorities, educational institutions, and hotel chains. Coordinated efforts support developing accessible training programs tailored to diverse destinations.

Institutional stakeholders should adopt a proactive, systematic approach to multilingual tourism planning. Currently, Thailand's tourism language policy reacts to market demands rather than anticipating them. The Ministry of Tourism and Sports should set clear language proficiency standards for tourism enterprises and link them to business certification and licensing.

In this framework, language competency is treated as a formal operational requirement, not just a preferred attribute. Collecting national data on service gaps caused by language barriers enables targeted training where it is most needed.

There is no universal solution because Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai have different language needs than smaller or emerging destinations. Each region should set its own language priorities. When policymakers value multilingual capacity alongside infrastructure, sustainability, and technology, they recognize language competence as a key economic asset. This approach helps Thailand stay competitive in the global tourism market.

Future research should examine the causal relationship between specific language training programmes and tourism revenue using primary data. Longitudinal studies on how multilingual certification standards affect tourist satisfaction and repeat visits would provide empirical support for this study's policy recommendations. Comparative research across ASEAN destinations with similar language investment strategies would help contextualise Thailand's multilingual position in the regional tourism market.

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