

Confronting My Lack of Knowledge About Japan's History

In high school, I chose the science track and took very few history courses. As a result, I was ashamed to realize that I did not fully understand the fact that Japan had once occupied Singapore. During this training program, I learned about this history through the exhibits at the City Gallery, and I was deeply shocked. Despite being Japanese, I became aware that I knew far less about my country's history and past than I had expected.

Encountering Japan's history while overseas made me recognize my ignorance even more strongly. Being outside my home country gave me a new perspective and forced me to reflect on how little I truly understood about Japan's historical actions and their impact. Through this experience, I came to appreciate the importance of accurately understanding my own country's past. Once my job-hunting process is over, I strongly hope to study Japanese history again on my own initiative and deepen my understanding of it.

Multilingual Signage and the Nature of Public Space

Singapore has four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Accordingly, announcements and signage on the subway are provided in all four languages, and multiple languages are displayed side by side on station signs. When I visited Singapore, I found the information well organized; despite the coexistence of different languages, there was little confusion. The use of color coding, consistent fonts, and careful layout made the necessary information easy to understand at a glance. I felt that the country's history and reality as a multiethnic society were naturally reflected in its public transportation system, which forms the foundation of daily life.

During this Singapore training program, I also realized that being bilingual or trilingual is completely normal there. Since the majority of the population is ethnically Chinese, I

often saw restaurant staff speaking Chinese to one another. However, the moment they began serving customers, they would instantly switch to English. The transition was seamless and natural, showing that using multiple languages is simply part of everyday life. I was deeply impressed by a situation that would rarely, if ever, be seen in Japan. At the same time, I was reminded that in Japan most people are monolingual, meaning they speak only Japanese. This difference in linguistic environment may strongly influence how public spaces are designed and perceived in each country.

On the other hand, I recently came across an online post by a Japanese individual stating, "Station names are now displayed in English, Korean, and Chinese, which makes them hard to understand. I want them to return to Japanese only." Many people agreed with this opinion, and I was surprised that even in 2026 there are still strong negative reactions toward multilingual signage. However, I do not think this view should be dismissed outright as outdated. Japanese is Japan's official language, and the argument that public transportation should first and foremost be easy to understand for Japanese speakers has a certain degree of validity.

It is true that increasing the amount of information on signs can reduce visibility. In stations and train cars, passengers must often make quick decisions, so an overload of information may increase cognitive burden. For elderly people or those unfamiliar with foreign languages, multiple languages displayed together may appear cluttered. If limited space forces the Japanese text to become smaller, readability could suffer. Since public spaces are used by an unspecified and diverse population, intuitive and user-friendly design is essential.

At the same time, Japan promotes itself as a tourism-oriented nation and welcomes many foreign visitors and residents. With the steady rise in the number of international travelers and foreign workers living in Japan, multilingual support in transportation has become not merely a courtesy but an essential part of social infrastructure. Not understanding the local language can severely limit one's freedom of movement and create anxiety or isolation. Especially during natural disasters—such as earthquakes or typhoons, which are common in Japan—the rapid and accurate transmission of information in multiple languages can be a matter of life and death. From this perspective, multilingual signage plays a crucial role in ensuring safety.

In Singapore, a multilingual environment is a basic social premise. In a society where many people naturally use multiple languages, it is only natural that public signage reflects that diversity. In contrast, Japan has long designed its public spaces on the assumption that most users are monolingual Japanese speakers. This fundamental difference may explain why reactions to multilingual signage differ between the two countries. However, as globalization continues, Japan must consider what kind of public spaces it wishes to create in the future.

The key issue is not choosing between “Japanese or multilingualism,” but rather finding ways to harmonize both. It is entirely possible to maintain Japanese as the primary language while providing support in other languages. For example, Japanese text could remain the most prominent, with other languages placed in a supplementary position. The use of pictograms, route numbers, and color coding can also reduce reliance on written language altogether. Furthermore, digital signage and smartphone applications could allow users to select their preferred language, overcoming the physical limitations of display space.

Multilingual signage is not merely a matter of convenience; it symbolizes the values a society upholds. Public space reflects whether a society chooses to exclude people with different backgrounds or to recognize them as members of the community. Valuing the Japanese language and being considerate of linguistic diversity are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, balancing both may be a sign of a mature and inclusive society.

The dissatisfaction seen in online comments may reflect anxiety about rapid social change. Such feelings are natural when familiar environments begin to transform. However, rather than rejecting change, it is important to seek ways to achieve harmony. The seamless language switching I observed in Singapore illustrated one possible model of coexistence in a diverse society. Public spaces function as mirrors of social maturity. Reflecting on multilingual signage ultimately invites us to reconsider what kind of society Japan aims to build in the years ahead.



This photo shows a notice posted on the wall of the subway. It is written in four languages: English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.