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**Reviewed by
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Book Reviews

Noodle Soup

***The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze*, by George Solt (University of California Press, 2014)**

***Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen – Japan’s Favorite Noodle Soup*, by Barak Kushner (Brill, 2012)**

***The Noodle Narratives: The Global Rise of an Industrial Food into the Twenty-First Century*, by Frederick Errington, Tatsuro Fujikura and Deborah Gewertz (University of California Press, 2013)**

It is hard to imagine how a simple noodle soup can be the focus of three recently published books. Yet, it is possible; and the three volumes discussed in this review approach and contextualize the noodle soup in very different ways. Ramen in Japan is more than just a food. Chinese by origin, the noodle soup was brought to Japan by migrants in the 1880s and quickly became an integral part of Japanese food life. At the end of World War II and in the postwar years, ramen became a life-saving, high-caloric food that was sold on the black market. Later, ramen was a cheap snack for blue-collar workers and considered a male food. The invention and launch of instant ramen in 1958 by Momofuku Ando, the founder of food giant Nissin Foods, marked a new phase of the food's history. Two museums, the Shin Yokohama Ramen Museum, which opened in 1994, and the Momofuku Ando Instant Ramen Museum in Osaka, which opened in 1999, cherish the noodle soup and its younger relative, the instant noodle soup. Ramen transformed into a fashionable icon of youth culture and became a vibrantly discussed object among ramen aficionados. Ramen was exported as a form of culinary soft power. Today, the dish is eaten at cheap stalls, in more refined eateries and in a range of regional variations throughout Japan. This noodle soup has become a symbol for affordable outside dining for middle-class employees; it also represents the rise of consumerism and is ultimately a symbol of "cool Japan" as depicted in Japanese manga and anime.

These very different aspects of ramen have made the dish one of the most popular in contemporary Japan; they are discussed from different angles in the following three books. In *The Untold History of Ramen*, historian George Solt takes readers through a journey from postwar Japan to contemporary times through the close inspection of the Chinese noodle soup. In five chapters, Solt illuminates the rise of ramen in Japan from the onset of the Meiji period (1868–1912) to the twenty-first century. The first chapter examines the emergence of ramen as a result of the arrival of Chinese food practices brought to Japan in the 1880s. The second chapter describes the bleakest war years and immediate postwar years (1944–7), dominated by hunger and malnutrition, when ramen was sold on the black market along with other filling dishes such as dumplings. In the third chapter, the author investigates ramen in the context of the period of high economic growth (1955–73). Because of large-scale imports of wheat from the United States, bread and ramen became widely available in Japan and changed the culinary habits of an entire generation. Nissin Foods' 1958 reinvention of ramen into an instant product, symbolic of youth culture, made it the subject of animated discussion among its devotees. The last chapter depicts instant ramen as an internationalized food that is popular and affordable worldwide, even among American prison inmates (p. 121).

There are two strengths to Solt's book. The first is a thorough examination of a number of previously unpublished US Occupation documents collected in

the National Diet Library, which reveals how food aid defined political relations between the United States and Japan in the postwar period. The US Occupation documents powerfully illuminate the shift of US policy from the initial demand that Japan should feed itself toward the provision of food aid, which became a means to use Japan to contain the spread of communism in the Pacific Rim (pp. 51–2 and p. 56). Readers of Solt's book also learn details about Japan and Korea as countries competing for US food aid and about the limited supply of German and Japanese food rations (p. 55). Within this context, Solt discusses the relationship between the United States and Japan. For instance, he shows how the United States appeared to fill the role of the generous rescuing nation but eventually demanded payments from Japan for food aid and for the accommodation of the occupation forces (p. 63).

The second strength of Solt's book is a critique of consumerism in Japan during the 1980s that shifts the perspective away from ramen as an acclaimed national symbol to the relationship between ramen, consumerism and neo-nationalism (p. 134). In this context, Solt cites Tamamura Toyō's article, "The Frightening Situation Where Plain Old Ramen Becomes the Basis for 'Theories of Japanese Superiority,'" published in the newspaper *Shūkan Yomiuri*, as particularly relevant for the analysis of food nationalism in Japan (p. 134). Solt convincingly shows how ramen – as an originally Chinese food – became integrated in Japanese dietary life and was elevated to an icon of Japanese national identity. National identity was fostered through food products and their consumption.

Whereas Solt remains close to ramen as a means of illustrating the relationship between Japan and the United States in the postwar period, Barak Kushner examines the relationship between China and Japan – in both of which countries he is a specialist – through culinary influences in his book *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen – Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup*. In a culinary history spanning from ancient China to contemporary times in Japan, Kushner shows how the close relationship between China and Japan contributed not merely to the popularity of ramen but also to the rise of a hybrid cuisine. Chinese migrants profoundly shaped cuisine in Japan. For instance, *Shippoku* cuisine is still eaten in contemporary Japan. The same is true for *champon* noodles, which were invented by a Chinese immigrant in 1887 (p. 115) in Nagasaki and remain a popular food. In addition, similar Chinese-inspired noodle dishes flourished, such as *Nanking soba*, which appeared in the city of Hakodate in Hokkaido in 1884 (p. 116). Kushner compellingly illuminates the significant role of China–Japan relations in the evolution of a Japanese national cuisine, which is a definite strength of the book.

The second merit of the book is the fact that Kushner alternates historical accounts with ethnographic and journalistic observations, which makes for very lively and accessible reading. In the last chapter, Kushner takes an ethnographic perspective and inspects ramen in popular culture. He lists a variety of examples such as ramen museums, ramen theme parks and ramen in manga, and he convincingly demonstrates the significance of ramen as a symbol of national identity and consumerism in popular culture (pp. 237–48). In doing so, he expands the findings of Satomi Fukutomi, who has written about the increasing number of ramen connoisseurs or ramen aficionados who share their experiences of visiting

ramen eateries online.¹ The examples of ramen in popular culture are impressive, but this discussion would have benefited from further analysis. Is the depiction of ramen in popular culture merely an arbitrary choice and could it be replaced with other popular foods, such as soba or tempura? Or is the multifaceted transformation of ramen from a daily snack for blue-collar workers to a cool instant food the reason for the popularity of the food in Japan's pop culture? These questions remain unanswered in Kushner's account.

There are a few other critical points to be raised. Many details remain unrelated to ramen and obscure the main argument, which makes it difficult to grasp the intention of the author. Is Kushner's objective to write a broader historical account of culinary habits or to provide insight about the rise of ramen, the rise of one particular food? One example of a meticulous account that is not related to ramen is Kushner's discussion of the rise of meat eating during the Meiji period. Frequently banned for religious reasons, meat eating did occur in Japan but remained a clandestine activity practiced under certain euphemisms, often for medicinal purposes. Supported by Meiji intellectuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1834–1901), Japan's encounter with Western culinary customs led to the inclusion of meat in Western-style banquet culture and later spread among the population in the form of dishes like beef stew. Meat eating as a symbol of progress and civilization has been previously discussed in detail.² It is only at the end of this section (pp. 110–11) that Kushner takes this discussion one step further and relates the increase of meat eating to the rise of ramen, but he does so by offering a single, limited comment: "The fact that meat and an expanded range of ingredients were slowly gaining entry into Japanese cuisine created steady social pressure for the types of dishes that would lead to the development of ramen." The book would have benefited from less meticulous historical accounts and a more connected discussion of the impacts of the Chinese–Japanese relationship on the evolution of ramen. This would have brought Kushner's objective – to show the impact of China on the evolution of a hybrid Japanese cuisine – closer to being realized in this work.

Contrary to the first two books discussed here, the third book *The Noodle Narratives: The Global Rise of an Industrial Food into the Twenty-First Century*, is not a historical account. It is a comparative study written by a team of three cultural anthropologists. The book investigates the rise of instant ramen in three countries – in Japan, the place of origin of instant ramen, the United States of America and Papua New Guinea. The book offers a socioeconomic analysis of ramen consumers. In Japan, ramen is a symbol for middle-class affluence, the rise of consumerism and, ultimately, the emergence of "cool Japan," which exports symbols of culinary soft power. In the United States, where Nissin entered the market in 1970 with instant noodle packages and with its Cup Noodle in 1973 (p. 65), three socioeconomic categories of instant ramen consumers have emerged. The first group of consumers is composed of college students, who eat instant noodles but are expected to eventually grow out of this habit (p. 67). The second group is prison inmates, who thrive on instant noodles as a taste of transitory freedom in the midst of restraint and restriction (p. 75). Contrary to the first group of instant noodles lovers – who are predominantly white and have

a middle-class background – prison inmate instant noodle consumers are predominantly male and come from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In 2009, only 34 percent of all prison inmates were white, 39 percent were black, and 21 percent were Hispanic (p. 74). The third group of instant noodle consumers are heavy users and mainly have a minority background, such as Hispanics of Mexican heritage, who prefer the brand Maruchan, which controls 85 percent of the Mexican market (p. 79). Heavy users of instant noodle soup do not view the consumption of this industrial food as a transient phase in their lives but depend on the dish on a daily basis. The final example of this comparative study is Papua New Guinea, where the food giant Nestlé entered the market in the early 1980s with its Maggi instant noodle products (p. 88). In Papua New Guinea, the makers of instant noodle soup target the bottom of the pyramid, the poorest socioeconomic group to which 85 percent of the population belongs. For them the instant noodle soup is affordable and accessible in food stalls and for purchase in cheap, small pack sizes. It is not only the mere consumption of the instant noodle soup in itself but also the act of purchasing it that contributes to the formation of their identities as consumers (p. 83).

The second part of this book discusses the global big food industry. The perspective shifts from the consumers to the producers of processed foods (p. 103). The world population is expected to reach nine billion people by the year 2050 and will be divided into people who are malnourished and people who are chronically overfed. Food industry giants argue that their products are life-saving and necessary. But the authors question how scientists develop and market their products, and, more importantly, how they evaluate and justify their accomplishments (p. 103). In contrast to the capitalist food giants, opponents of the food industry such as Michael Pollan advocate the development of regional food systems that make fresh and locally produced food more available to consumers (pp. 119–25). But (how) can these principles be put into practice? Food technology experts such as Christine Bruhn contend that it is essential to find a balance between the demand of a radical self-sustainability and the responsibility of the food industry (p. 122). The food industry could develop new forms of farming, such as precision agriculture, and seek to improve storage facilities and market access in order to avoid food waste (p. 133).

The analysis of ramen consumers is convincing and sheds light on the reasons for the consumption of fast-food products. However, there are a few critical points to be raised. There should have been greater critical reflection on the utilization of an instant food as a tool for socioeconomic analysis. Also, the celebration of an instant food as key to the formation of consumer identity in Papua New Guinea seems questionable and slightly disturbing. The second part of the book raises very significant questions but leaves too little room for their exploration, which is unfortunate. The most significant question that the authors raise – how to achieve self-sustainability and how to utilize the food industry to reach this objective – deserves a more critical and theoretically inspired investigation, which would have added depth to the book.

The topic of ramen may initially seem trivial but given its international popularity scholarly analysis of the food is timely. All three books offer innovative and

viable approaches to food studies; a closer look at them reveals that the questions at stake are essential. Pursuing the history of ramen uncovers little-known accounts of historical and political constellations, as Solt und Kushner show. Bigger issues in food politics, as discussed in *The Noodle Narratives*, raise the question of how we are going to feed a growing world population and what role the food industry will play in this. Thinking about these questions is significant and makes these books useful reading for students of food studies, East Asian studies, history and cultural anthropology.

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Notes

1. Satomi Fukutomi, "Ramen Connoisseurs: Class, Gender and the Internet," in *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present* ed. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assmann (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 257–74.
2. Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 24–34; Akira Shimizu, "Meat-Eating in the Kojimachi District of Edo," in *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present*, ed. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assmann. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010, 92–107.

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