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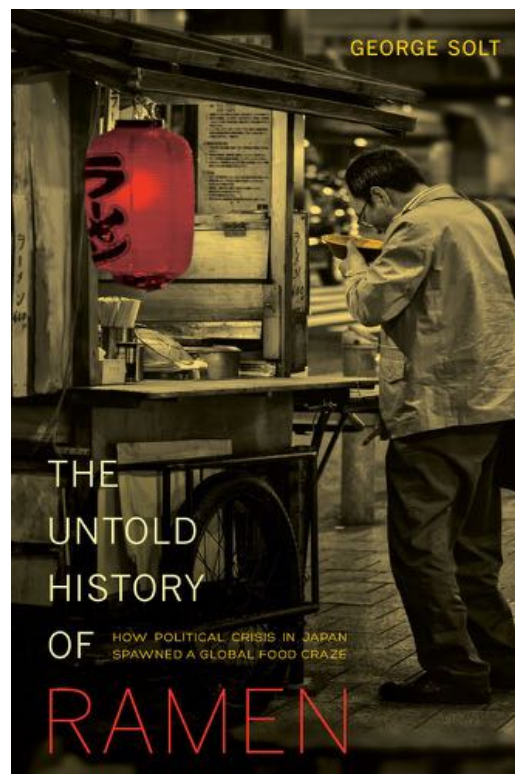
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Book Review: *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze* by George Solt. Fi Berkley: University of California Press, 2014.



**“Ramen cart in Ueno, Tokyo.” Photograph by Danny Chong Kim Nam.
Cover Design by Lia Tjandra.**

In *The Untold History of Ramen*, George Solt explores how something as simple as ramen noodles can be transformed from humble beginnings as a Chinese dish to what is now recognized as a symbol of Japanese culture. Solt shows how the introduction of one simple ingredient can have broad implications not only when it comes to dietary preferences, but in politics and culture as well. While it has been referred to by many names, this review, like Solt's work, will use its current and most common name, ramen.

There are many different and divergent histories of modern ramen, and Solt offers three of the most popular origin histories. The first version includes Tokugawa Mitsukuni (1628-1701), a popular *daimyo*, or great lord, and second in line to be *shogun*, or effective ruler of all of Tokugawa Japan. In this version, he was, above all else, an avid ramen fan, and had a Chinese adviser who suggested adding savory Chinese seasoning to his noodles. The second version coincides with the opening of Japan during the age of American imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. This version sees the introduction of the wheat-based noodle coinciding with the influx of western supplies, like wheat, along with a surge of Chinese workers who brought along their culinary preferences. Finally, there is the history of the Rai-Rai Ken, the first Chinese food restaurant that was owned by a Japanese national of that name.¹

Instead of serving traditional noodle dishes, Rai-Rai Ken preferred to serve soy sauce based dishes with pork, fishmeal cake, spinach, and seaweed. Ken then gained attention for providing quick, cheap, and tasty ramen for the burgeoning population of wage workers in the Asakusa district of Tokyo. While Solt shows that the origin stories are different, they are all similar in how they connect the present to the past, the only difference being the details that are emphasized. Each can be credited with part of the story of ramen's rise in popularity.

¹ George Solt, *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 19.

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Solt sets the stage for the popularity of ramen in the interwar era of the 1920s and 1930s by explaining how the industrialization of Japan in the late 1890s, along with the Sino-Japanese (1895) and Russo-Japanese (1905) wars, increased the industrial production of Japan. Solt specifically notes that during World War I, Japan's industrial output had risen from 1.4 billion Yen to 6.8 billion.² With this manufacturing and industrial growth came the surge of workers needed to support these industries. These workers provided the foundation for the popularity of ramen as a source of cheap, tasty "stamina food."³ Despite the popularity of ramen from the 1890s to the 1920s, the mobilization for war in the 1930s brought about a cultural and governmental change in policies, which banned items considered luxurious and frivolous. Ramen fell into this category, as it was considered "wasteful and self-indulgent."⁴ It was not until the end of World War II and during the American occupation (1945-1952) that this perception began to change.

The offices of the Supreme Commander of Allied Powers (SCAP) chose to retain the ration system that the Japanese had in place during the war. Furthermore, SCAP-issued memos created a ration discrepancy between Western foreign nationals, who were ordered to receive a ration of 2,400 calories, and East Asian nationals, who were to receive a ration of 1,800 calories. This latter group would often receive no more than 800 calories worth of rations, despite receiving three times the bulk amount of food aid from the American occupation authorities. The food aid came mostly in the form of American wheat, which would often be routed into the black markets of Japan, where it was used to create many of those carbohydrate-rich "stamina foods" *ramen*, *gyoza* (pork dumplings), and *okonomiyaki* (savory pancakes).⁵ It was in this context that the desire for ramen would spring up again, as the availability of rice declined while American wheat became more

² Ibid., 22.

³ Ibid., 47.

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ Ibid., 51.

prevalent.

As Solt outlines, direct food aid to Japan was part of the U.S.'s plan to curry favor with the Japanese population. This was done in the face of growing political pressures of Communism after Japanese soldiers held in China and Russia were repatriated back to Japan. The beginning of the Cold War created a unique problem when it came to Japan. American occupation policy began with the aim to disarm Japan so there would be no future threat from them; however, after the escalation of the Korean conflict (1950-53), American policy switched gears in what has become known as the "reverse course," and began encouraging Japan to partially rebuild its military with infusions of U.S. aid and support. Solt points out a very similar course of action when it came to the policies concerning food aid and distribution. The United States abandoned its policies that expected the Japanese government to provide for itself and instead took a direct role in encouraging the industrial and infrastructural sector. The United States provided loans to the Japanese government to purchase wheat, as well other materials used in the economy, to rebuild the sectors vital to making Japan a viable military ally in the burgeoning Cold War. This massive influx of American wheat in turn led to the increased availability and popularity of wheat-based foods like ramen.

Even though this is a book on the history of ramen, Solt's choice to investigate the political aspect gives a larger insight as to how something as simple as Japanese cultural food preferences is connected to the U.S.'s Cold War policies of maintaining an export market for American wheat to fight communism abroad. The exportation of wheat eventually became less about battling communism, and more about changing the cultural mindset and dietary preferences of the population to secure a foothold for the wheat trade. Solt carefully details how the United States deliberately constructed an image in which wheat was superior to rice with the intent of changing the perception of the Japanese populace. The United States supplemented the school lunch programs in Japan with a diet of wheat, dairy, and meat, and further cemented these ideas by using native governmental

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departments to promote their agenda. The offices of Civil Information and Education validated the American agenda issuing leaflets on how, “protein is a body builder. Wheat flour contains 50% more protein than rice.”⁶ When the U.S. pushed for the rebuilding of the infrastructure of Japan, it revived a worker influx to the cities, and this is the point where Solt sees a revitalized urban labor force powered by ramen made with American wheat.

Later chapters of the book show the transformation of ramen from a traditional Chinese dish to an engine of cultural identity for Japan in the 1950s, when instant ramen was born. In 1955, a company released an instant ramen by the name of Aji Tsuke Chuka Men (Flavored Chinese Noodles), but since the inventor failed to secure a patent, the honor of being recognized as the creator of the first instant ramen fell to Nissin Food Corporation, with the powerful Taiwanese-Japanese businessman, Ando Momofuku (1910-2007), at the helm. Ando took advantage of being in the right place at the right time, by having access to abundant American wheat and providing a cheap food to the domestic market, as well as supplementing the school lunch programs with instant ramen.⁷ Solt points out that the story of Nissin Foods is “remarkable due the scale of growth and the uniqueness of its product.”⁸ Solt foreshadows how far reaching Nissin Foods became when it was given permission by the government to be marketed as a “special health food” in 1960. Furthermore, through a successful marketing plan that spanned decades, Nissan was able to sponsor television, radio, cinema, and at one point even create its own theme park.

By the late 1990s and early 2000s Japan would see a resurgence of ramen shops. These ramen shops would not be like the traditional shops of the 1950s, but instead shed the Chinese design and features such as the traditional red and white signs that adorned the storefronts, and took on a distinctly Japanese décor. Solt explains there was a movement amongst many popular chefs

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁸ Ibid.

like Sano Minoru, also known as the Demon of Ramen,⁹ which called for sticking with purely domestic ingredients. Minoru had a reputation for being stubborn and rigorous in both his ingredient selection and punishment of subordinates. It was this push for a domestic purity that led to a strong national identity affiliated with the product, much like how the “Made in the U.S.A.” motto resounds amongst American buyers. In recent years, the rise of the internet allowed for ramen to evolve even further in popularity, as customers used it as a means to rank and evaluate shops. Shop owners, in turn, have begun to borrow popular elements from other shops.

Solt concludes on the note that ramen in Japan is a food of contradiction: it was a Chinese dish made with American wheat, popularized and then claimed by the Japanese. It was made by Chinese chefs and taught to the Japanese despite its popularity during a time of great violence and animosity between the two nations. To further emphasize this theme of transformation, Solt points out that ramen was once sold by pushcart vendors and western eateries tailored to manual laborers, immigrants, and other displaced groups. In the last few decades, however, it has become something of a trendy food popular among the younger generations, and likened to “fine French and Italian cuisine.”¹⁰ Solt’s most important note was that the “exceptional fact” about ramen was how it provided a means of studying historical interrelatedness of so many different areas of social organization.¹¹

Solt’s narrative of ramen provides a fresh outlook on Japanese and global history. Often history is recorded as a timeline of experiences, events, and dates – it rarely includes information about something as intimate as food and how it relates to the “traditional” historical narrative. The role of ramen against the backdrop of large themes in history is entertaining, and the book provides a delightful window for readers familiar with the role of the United States in the occupation of Japan, the Cold War, and the

⁹ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰ Ibid., 180.

¹¹ Ibid., 186.

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Marshall Plan. Solt's narrative momentum falters in several of the later chapters, as the book slows down to explain the post-occupation rise of ramen. While the information is pertinent to the overall history of ramen, the change of pace leads the author into what the non-expert might consider minutiae or trivia. However, Solt recovers in the conclusion as he explains the interrelatedness of the history of ramen with other areas. This book can serve as inspiration to many aspiring historians, encouraging them to branch off with their own research based on certain aspects of Solt's narrative.

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