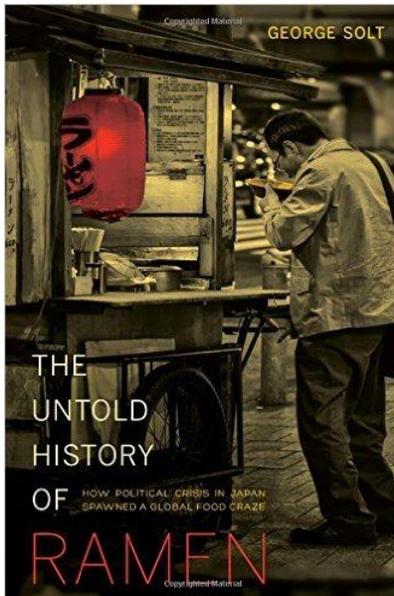


**George Solt, *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. 240 pp. ISBN 9789529277564**



George Solt's *The Untold History of Ramen* examines the history of a food trend that is on the tip of every Japan specialist's tongue. This work joins other critical works on Japanese foodways, and is an accessible and serious contribution to the field's wider critique of food cultures and national identity.<sup>1</sup> Solt declares early on that he is "not an aficionado of ramen," (p. 8) and that his book is not intended as a guide to connoisseurship. Rather, he aims to make the case that "the story of ramen" shows "the changing role of food in the reproduction of labor, power, and the redefinition of the nation in Japan" (p. 3). More broadly, the book uses the case of ramen to explore the cultural history of Japan, and Japan's relations with the world.

On the face of it, Solt's book faces some direct competition. Barak Kushner's *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen—Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup* (2012) also employs ramen to argue for the multifarious origins and historical contingency of Japan's culture. The two authors have, moreover, consulted many of the same sources.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the scope and foci of each work are distinct. Kushner begins with the invention of noodles in China, and then chronicles the long-term development of Japanese food and taste preferences from ancient times. Ramen only "debuts on the Japanese stage" on page 155 of his 270-page text. On the other hand, Solt's much slimmer volume uses ramen to tell the story of Japan's economic and political rise from the late-nineteenth century, with particular attention to the construction of labor, nation-building, and extension of global soft power. In a particularly incisive passage about the American reception of "cool Japan," which might also be read as an oblique criticism of Kushner's work, Solt argues that:

*American news stories about ramen tended to replicate one another and follow a predictable story line, beginning with Tampopo as a way to explain the food's supposed ritual significance to the fashionable Japanese, followed by a description of its difference from the instant version, a joke about slurping, and finally the introduction of a few local shops (p. 173).*

<sup>1</sup> See: Jeffrey W. Alexander, *Brewed in Japan: The Evolution of the Japanese Beer Industry* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013); Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (London: Reaktion, 2007); James Farrer, ed., *The Globalization of Asian Cuisine: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Barak Kushner, *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen—Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assman, eds., *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Both authors make prominent use of ramen critic Ōsaki Hiroshi, for instance.

Given their differing scholarly commitments, it should not be surprising that Kushner's work explores more deeply Japan's relationship with China, while Solt devotes proportionally more attention to the consequences of American policy interventions and appropriations. A telling difference lies in the analogies offered by each author to describe ramen's localization: Kushner compares ramen to General Tso's Chicken, while Solt brings up the case of American pizza. Considering their different strengths, it would not be redundant to read both books.

*The Untold History of Ramen* contains five chapters and is divided into two parts. The first part comprises three chapters devoted to a historical contextualization of ramen's origins, and the rise of its appreciation through the 1970s. The final part contains two chapters that consider transformations in the cultural meanings of ramen—both its consumption and production—from the 1980s to the present. Solt's reflection on the historical development of ramen draws out a host of thematic issues, but I will examine two of them in depth below: (1) ramen's relationship to the modern Japanese corporation, and (2) its transformation of Japanese national identity.

First, Solt's narrative touches on the various corporations that have played roles in the popularization and canonization of ramen. This includes the Raumen Museum of Shin-Yokohama, masterminded by Iwaoka Yōji. Solt devotes particular attention, however, to Nissin Foods Corporation and its founder, Andō Momofuku. The material presented here largely follows the perspectives contained in Nissin's corporate history and Andō's autobiography.<sup>3</sup> Solt's main contribution is a contextualization of Nissin's development and goals within postwar Japan's business environment, national identity, and geopolitical circumstances.

We learn that Nissin's development followed a pattern typical of Japanese corporations of the period from the Asia-Pacific War through the era high speed economic growth. The corporation established a partnership with one of Japan's ten dominant trading houses (*sōgō shōsha*). The company enjoyed relatively harmonious labor relations, but followed trends of the 1960s and 1970s in treating its women workers as "supplemental wage earners" (p. 99). And, it led a state-recognized cartel that resulted from an intervention by the Japanese government in its patent litigation spree of the 1960s (p. 103).

Nissin's signature product, instant ramen, was also well positioned to succeed in Japan's postwar circumstances. It was a modern convenience food prepared with the help of new kitchen appliances, marketed on radio and television, and sold at supermarkets. Instant ramen was also a way to use inexpensive imported wheat flour to make noodles, rather than bread, and thus ostensibly "contributed to the preservation of Japanese food culture" (p. 95). Finally, it was, for a time, considered a healthy food in line with contemporary thinking about the nutritional benefits of a wheat-flour-based diet.

Solt points out, however, that the business model followed by ramen entrepreneurs, as well as popular writings and fictional works about ramen express a marked anti-corporate ethos. The system of independently owned ramen shop branches (*norenwake*) resists "the monopolizing tendencies of corporate capital"; the spread of these branches expands the reach of the brand without "any financial benefit accruing to the original owner" (pp. 180–81). In terms of literary symbolism, proletarian literature in the prewar period used this humble noodle soup to express economic desperation in the midst of urbanization and social atomization. In postwar Japan, the food was closely associated with manual laborers in the popular imagination, as well as the works of writers and filmmakers. By the 1970s, however, it also acquired "an aura of economic liberation" (p. 88). The dream of leaving the *salaryman* life and becoming the boss of one's own ramen restaurant became a recurring theme in the popular media. And since the 1980s, individually made ramen has been celebrated and promoted in the form of egalitarian nostalgia, and as a counter to "corporate America and the American fast-food industry that represents it" (p. 183). In this way, Solt has adroitly dealt with the historical meanings that ramen has acquired since the twentieth century, and placed it within Japan's

<sup>3</sup> Solt contradicts Nissin's claim to have been first to bring instant ramen to market—noting the presence of a 1955 product by Matsuda Sangyō (p. 91). However, he does not provide a citation for his counterclaim.

changing economic landscape. No other account that I have seen has so skillfully combined business histories with popular writings, advertising, and fiction.<sup>4</sup>

Solt's study is also a thought-provoking contribution to the study of food and national identity. One of Solt's central claims is that ramen has acquired the status of a "national food" (*kokuminshoku*) in Japan, though its adoption arose from "multiethnic effort" (p. 35). In that sense, *The Untold History of Ramen* is also a story of the contingency of, and diversity within, Japan's national culture. One provocative implication of this study is that the categories of Japanese cuisine, as they have been constructed since the Meiji period, are more fluid than has been recognized. While Katarzyna Cwiertka has argued that rising national consciousness in Japan from the late nineteenth century yielded a "tripod" of Japanese (*washoku*), Chinese (*Chūka*), and Western foods (*yōshoku*), ramen does not sit comfortably within the category of *Chūka*.<sup>5</sup> In the prewar period it was served at Chinese restaurants, Western restaurants, cafés (*kissaten*) and pushcarts (*yatai*). More recently, it has become "an important component of both official and unofficial attempts at remaking 'Japan' as a consumer brand for foreigners" (p. 9).

These observations about ramen's hybrid origins and multiple meanings cast into doubt received notions of Japan's national traditions. This is not new intellectual terrain—debunking Japan's national traditions as invented has a well-established pedigree. However, Solt delivers the unorthodox argument that ramen—despite its non-Japanese origins—can even be a vehicle for neo-nationalism. As he argues, the embrace of ramen as an "emblem" of the nation augurs a new national identity for Japan, one defined by "a reality-television-inspired sensibility toward history, mixing and matching elements of a 'Japan' that is as much the product of foreigners' expectations as anything else" (p. 183). And yet, for all its provocativeness, this argument is not entirely satisfactory—how does one reconcile the recent nationalization of this food with the return of "Shina soba" (using a prewar term for China) in the naming of the food and the use of classical Chinese imagery to market instant versions of it (pp. 138, 155–56)? Nor does Solt address the discursive field to explain competing constructions of Japanese food. While some might claim ramen as *kokuminshoku*, others, like ramen critic Ōsaki Hiroshi, vigorously deny that it is either *washoku* or *Nihon ryōri* (Japanese cuisine).<sup>6</sup> In light of recent attention to the definition of *washoku*—recognized as an intangible world cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2013—some discussion of the meanings of these terms is needed to dissect the role of food in Japanese (neo)nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Solt's subsection on "Neonationalism and the Noodle Soup" does not take the issue much further. The index does not even contain entries for *washoku*, *kokuminshoku*, or Japanese cuisine.

*The Untold History of Ramen* comes amid a wave of scholarly interest in Japan's foodways, and an awareness of the hybridity of Japan's traditions. Solt establishes a strong case for ramen's inclusion in such discussions. And, of particular interest to readers of this journal, the work provides excellent detail regarding the corporations, entrepreneurs, and shopkeepers who helped create the market for these soup noodles. More than any other work on ramen that I have seen, his research spans an extraordinary range of source material, including manga, literature, television, film, and advertising.

Solt's book is written in a style suitable for a general readership, but even specialists will find much to learn from it. I was fascinated to read about the origin of the ubiquitous A-set and B-set meals at ramen restaurants (p. 83). Some chapters can be assigned individually at the college level. I have found no better examination of the intersection of U.S. food aid, geopolitics, and black-marketeering in post-surrender Japan than chapter two.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the book sits uneasily at the crossroads of a popular work and an academic monograph. The work

<sup>4</sup> While Kushner's account also details the rise of Nissin Foods Corp., the focus is on the biography of Andō Momofuku.

<sup>5</sup> Cwiertka, p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Kushner, pp. 10–11.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Assman, "The Remaking of a National Cuisine: The Food Education Campaign in Japan," in *Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*, eds. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 165.

<sup>8</sup> However, much of the chapter's content has been published separately. See: George Solt, "Ramen and U.S. Occupation Policy," in *Japanese Foodways, Past and Present*, eds. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

devotes considerable space to historical context. But, the conclusion is a slim eight pages and a clear, coherent argument is difficult to pin down. One is even left wondering about the book's subtitle: "How Political Crisis Spawned a Global Food Craze." Considering that the global ramen craze can be dated to the 1990s (at the earliest), one might be hard pressed to identify from the preceding decades the specific political crisis that would spawn this phenomenon.

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