

INTERVIEW/ Barak Kushner: Where would Japan be without China's culinary contribution?

By JAMES GREEN

In Japan, the quest for the tastiest ramen borders on national obsession and has spawned countless books. In a sense, it reflects how Japanese view life in all its complexities.

As a pop culture and culinary phenomenon, chowing down a bowl of ramen noodles seems to be a quintessentially Japanese experience.

What gets lost in the mix is the Chinese connection.

So argues Barak Kushner, a Japanese history professor and fellow of Corpus Christi College, at Cambridge University, in "Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen -- Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup."

"Ramen is not merely food, but a path to serious gastronomic enlightenment," Kushner writes.

The fact that there are more ramen restaurants in Japan than any other type of eatery bears this out.

And then there are Instant Cup Noodles, voted by Japanese as the country's greatest invention in the 20th century, and the epitome of the quick snack.

If ramen is a cornerstone of modern Japanese society, as Kushner would have it, then, in his view, Japanese ought to thank China for it.

Kushner is at pains to point out that ramen's very existence is the product of centuries of interaction between Japan and China, which historically is known for its fine cuisine.

He also uses ramen to explore how the Japanese identity is constructed through food, arguing that the history of Japanese cuisine is more dynamic than many realize. That may also



Barak Kushner with his latest book "Slurp!" (Provided by Barak Kushner)

explain the plethora of ramen manga, the odd movie and a museum devoted to the dish.

Following are excerpts of an interview with Kushner:

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Question: You use ramen as a means to study the entire span of Japanese history. What inspired you to take that approach?

Answer: I was reading widely, and I came across an interesting Japanese book that looked at the role of Chinese in Yokohama Port in the waning days of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the early Meiji Era. It talked about the thousands of Chinese living in Japan in those days and the influence they had, and how popular they were, and I thought: "That's a pretty different story to the one I'm aware of." As an American growing up, it's all Western history: How the West opened Japan and so on. In a sense the whole East Asian story gets lost.

I was interested in food history,

and a combination of those two factors--how China had influenced Japan, an untold story, and a history of how the Japanese see their own food merged in what I thought was the perfect combination, which was ramen.

Especially in the 1990s and the 21st century, you find this vibrant popular cultural phenomenon and tremendous cultural attachment to ramen, which is arguably not domestically Japanese. There's an incongruity between food obsession on the modern level, with an element of food that wasn't necessarily historically Japanese, but had somehow become the archetype of Japanese food, which I thought was a really interesting historical phenomenon.

Question: Is Japan unique or unusual in the degree that it defines itself through food?

Answer: I think Japan has tendencies that show up in other cultures with long traditional histories of cuisine, such as France and China. The fascinating

aspect of Japan is that it grew from a nation of malnutrition and lack of food, and has grown into a nation that is arguably the Michelin Guide's top star. It's not just Japanese cuisine now that excels in Japan, it's also international cuisine. Japan is not only the mecca for Japanese food, it's become a mecca for food in general, and I think that is almost unique. If you go to Paris, you think French food, but you don't think great sushi, or Italian. But you do in Tokyo, and Japanese people do as well.

I live in the United Kingdom, and if you look on British TV it is rather shocking the number of cooking shows one can watch, compared to anywhere I've lived before. But people don't blog about it in the same way, you don't see movies about it, you don't see songs about it, and in Japan you do, and that is unusual.

And that's what caught my eye with the ramen topic: There's this vibrant cultural discussion and almost fantasy life in Japan that surrounds food, and that is particularly interesting to historians: how and why did that develop, and why did it attach itself to a particular food group?

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Question: You argue for the connection between food and politics. In the context of recent territorial disputes, and the looting of Japanese department stores and restaurants in parts of China, do you think ramen will continue to be marketed as a Japanese dish? Is it ever claimed as a Chinese dish?

Answer: Generally speaking the Chinese do not claim ramen. The emphasis is on the soup, not just the noodles. Since the 1980s when cultural exchange began again, and then in the 1990s,

more so with food, ramen that was imported back into China was sold as Japanese style noodle soup. And there was a cachet, because Japan was seen as modern, successful, it was hygienic. And that's pretty much standard: You go to stores and Japanese and Chinese dishes are sold separately.

You've seen looting of Japanese department stores, Japanese stores taking the names off their shopping bags. I think that will die down. I don't think necessarily on the smaller level of ramen we'll see much difficulty. I do think we'll see continued friction over food exchange. You've already seen that in Japan, as they import a lot of food, and Chinese food is seen as tainted occasionally, as various chemicals come up in it. There was a 'gyoza-gate' a number of years ago. We've seen this between Korea and China as well. That will continue because of the increasing exchange of products in East Asia, and instant ramen is also one of them.

But one could use ramen and other such examples to demonstrate historically how much more interaction and beneficial sets of relationships existed over time. Especially when you think of early producers of pre-ramen type dishes, they're Chinese entrepreneurs in Japan. They are there, they are creating, the Japanese are buying, the students are eating it, there's profit on both sides. What does that say about the relationship prewar, compared to the relationship now? There are a lot of questions that come up, that behoove us to rethink our understanding about it. We have to consider whether it was always a bad relationship between Japan and China, as a lot of people say, but which I think is inaccurate.

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The author is in Japan on a Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation scholarship. He is currently a journalism intern with The Asahi Shimbun AJW.