**Instructor’s Foreword**

Christine Chung’s essay “‘Hello Kitty Noodles’ and Ramen Culture in the 21st Century” combines heartfelt musings with an amazing array of research material on ramen culture. She entered my PWR 1 “Politics of Food: A Transnational Tasting Menu” with some trepidation because she feared that writing in PWR might squelch her creative juices. However, Christine persevered with her writing assignments in PWR and found ways to push past her discomfort with the “idea of research writing,” and she discovered new writing tools that made her style both vivid and compelling. I was so excited by her work because the strength of her writing voice grew with each draft of her essay. When we met for our conferences, Christine came in with a draft, several questions and a suspicious look, but every time she left with renewed enthusiasm about her writing project. During our discussions she pushed her thinking as well as her writing and research strategies in several ways. The topic of “ramen” was so new to the area of food studies that she had to invent a methodology to approach her topic. Early on we discussed looking at it from both a Western and Eastern perspective, and while this offered a challenge and made more work for her, she realized that doing so would not only strengthen her argument but would control the focus of her paper. Her argument dispels the myth that Americans invented “fast food.” She claims that ramen took hold in Japanese culture for several economic as well as political reasons. Christine writes, “This major success can only be fully appreciated upon an exploration into Japanese and American fast food culture, where it is discovered that fast food in Japan, to the shock of many, began long before a pair of golden arches found its way over to Asia.”

Yet, it was when she began to weave in her personal narrative with the larger historical and cultural claims that the essay came to life. “‘Hello Kitty Noodles’ and Ramen Culture in the 21st Century” captures the vivid history of ramen and makes a strong claim about its resonance on both sides of the Pacific as well as its established place in today’s global food market. Christine draws in her reader with compelling material, and she has developed a style that might best be described as “creative non–fiction” because of the biographical elements in her essay. Because her topic is unconventional, she is able to approach it with a fresh perspective. This “noodle narrative” explains how despite Western influence and trends it was not the “spontaneous creation of one single food item [that] was guilty for the modernization of Asian cuisine, Japan endured its own unique circumstances independent of any modern acts of Western culinary colonization.” Christine’s essay displays well–researched claims, but most importantly it also captures the joy she has for her topic, a feeling that comes through for the reader in every line.

*Cheryl Greene*
“Hello Kitty Noodles” and Ramen Culture in the 21st Century

Christine M. Chung

Ramen entered my life under the nickname “Hello Kitty noodles,” an alias formed not only from my mother’s own secret inside joke but from convenience as well, since “ramen” is pronounced lah–myun in Korean, the phonetics of which are difficult for younger tongues to pronounce. She would often carve out time to make the journey from our home to a small restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, where, hidden beneath the shadows of skyscrapers and tucked away behind an avenue of warehouses, Hana–Ichimonme lay waiting to satiate our craving for ramen. I would wait in anticipation for weeks until that one day, with tired eyes and a forced smile, my mother would propose a daytrip to Little Tokyo. I was a model child until then, believing that any misdeed on my part would prevent my opportunity to eat Hello Kitty noodles in some weird karmic fate. This pattern quickly led me to deify each ramen experience, and as I did so, every ribbon of noodle and every slurp of soup became morsels of some fabulous heaven. As an ending applause to each lunch, my mother and I would always pay a quick visit to the Sanrio store for Hello Kitty toys and stationery.

It was only later in my life that I learned that ramen offered my mother the same relief as it offered me. She was just barely holding on to her crumbling marriage at the time, so every journey to Little Tokyo was not only an escape to gustatory heaven, but an escape from the spousal abuse she experienced almost daily. It was only after her divorce when we were able to revisit our familiar friend again, but this time under much different circumstances. Since our new living situation made the voyage to Little Tokyo nearly impossible, my mother would rely upon boxed Sapporo Ichiban ramen noodles to recreate a miniature Hana–Ichimonme within our tiny apartment where, much to my mother’s delight, I overlooked the difference and slurped away as voraciously as before. The consistency of my love for ramen was special indeed—so special that even today, it is through ramen that I, my mother, and now my brother all exchange our silent “I love yous” with a brief, knowing glance over the steam that spirals upward from our bowls of pure delight.

Now that I am in college, my ramen experience has changed yet again. It is now my partner in academic crime (procrastination)—I often spend my nights warming my hands against a Styrofoam cup of instant ramen, looking deeply into the broth to find, much to my sleep–deprived surprise, pieces of noodles, carrots, and cabbage floating to form the words “MUST WRITE IHUM PAPER.” And now, instead of the customary post–lunch trip to the Hello Kitty store, I end each of my ramen experiences by probing deeply into the meaning it has held within my own life. What about ramen has allowed it to tag along with me (and the millions of other ramen enthusiasts) through thick and thin? My personal conjecture, as I will explain, is that ramen’s culinary flexibility allowed it a greater
degree of cultural elasticity, and this ability to satisfy the palates of any country’s people has expectedly granted the industry a large amount of political clout in the growing arena of food politics.

My upbringing left me at the cusp of both the Korean and American cultures, and my varying socioeconomic statuses allowed me to indulge in both authentic ramen and the partially hydrogenated–oiled joys of instant noodles. It is with these tools that I now explore the power of ramen culture with both an Asian sensitivity for tradition and an analytical Western edge.

**Ramen, the Early Years**

Ramen has established itself as the ubiquitous symbol of the on–the–go, urban meal, which is a feat made more notable when considering it has become a dominant food product in both Asia and the United States. In the endeavor to discover what has made this cultural phenomenon possible, an analysis of ramen’s rich South Asian roots and an exploration into fast food culture is necessary. A combination of these two analyses will confirm how ramen’s accessibility and ease of preparation has allowed it to embody the uncomplicated togetherness of American cuisine. All this will underscore the fact that, despite the Food and Drug Administration’s recent efforts to reduce the production of foods with high sodium levels, and even amidst the public’s fear of MSG and other instant food additives, ramen culture has found a comfortable niche in American culinary culture and will stick around for quite some time.

Most American ramen lovers can confidently point to Japan as the home country of authentic ramen, but when asked to recount the history between the time of its creation and its cultural inception into the United States, only mumbled conjectures can be made. This is not necessarily a bad thing—in many ways it is this ambiguity about the history of ramen that has allowed it to establish a new footing in the Western world independent of its Eastern history.

In its earliest form, ramen was originally a Chinese dish which migrated to Japan when the two respective countries opened ports for trade in 1872. However, ramen held its proverbial coming–out party after China’s defeat in the Sino–Japanese War (1894–1895), when a wave of postwar crisis washed thousands of impoverished Chinese students onto Japan’s shores. Chinese noodle shops and other various outdoor stalls blossomed quickly in order to cater to the needs of Japan’s new (albeit unwanted) immigrants. And it is truly a miracle (or merely a fated repercussion of war) that an originally Chinese dish integrated relatively seamlessly into the Japanese lineup of foods, especially when considering the elitist nature of Japanese cuisine.

The thoughtful presentation and immaculate preparation that goes into each dish has inspired author after author to deliver multi–edition cookbooks and cultural case studies about what makes Japanese cuisine tick. The devotion behind these endeavors is fueled by a field of “believers”—individuals who are devoted to Japanese culinary culture passionately enough to argue for its superiority over American meals:

> Whoever said Japanese cuisine was all presentation and no food was, of course, quite wrong, but one can at the same time understand how such a statement came to be made, particularly if one comes from a country where it is simply enough that food looks decent and tastes all right. (Richie 10)
In a somewhat anti-Western manner, Richie argues that the simplicity and detailed preparation of each Japanese sushi roll, noodle, and soup dish are a sort of argument for its gustatory success, claiming that “the presentational ethos is so much a part of the Japanese cuisine [that it] continues right into the mouth” (Richie 10). Japanese dishes, in short, find pride in being both pleasing to the eye and pleasing to the mouth, and it is this apparent culinary elitism that makes ramen’s success in Japan even more notable. Ramen is characteristically oily and, depending on the region of Japan, it is also served with a potpourri of messy add-ins (Appendix A). It is a wonder that such a bourgeois food item could have woven itself so seamlessly into such a sterile food culture.

One of the many explanations for this unlikely transition is provided in Alice Yen Ho’s *At the Southeast Asian Table*. Ho discusses the idea that while international food trade has allowed dozens of different Asian food items to melt into a gigantic amalgam of similar tastes, different cultures continue to share similarities that exist outside of geographical closeness—the use of rice, the ability to cultivate ingredients in home gardens, and local open-air markets, to name a few. Multiple intersections existed between China and Japan both before and during the Sino-Japanese War, so it seems that the bonding force of WWII acted as the final bridge to allow ramen to travel quickly from one country to another.

Japan’s deafening defeat in WWII led to a food shortage that forced many citizens to eat anything and everything, and this change in circumstance gave birth to an underground culture of black market food stalls which sold Chinese-style soup noodles for cheap. This underground movement, like the George Foreman grill phenomenon today, pulsed loudly enough and for a long enough period of time to earn a recognized niche in the dominant culture. The need for food after the war allowed the aroma of authentic, street vendor ramen to overstep virtually all boundaries of economic class (as ramen at that time was associated with the poorer and middle class regions of Japan). And after thinning the original Chinese *lo mein* noodles and adding more soy flavor to the broth, ramen eventually found its seat in the lineup of traditional Japanese cuisine which both the working and upper classes enjoyed indiscriminately. Ramen culture has continued to grow and burgeon since, and the phenomenon has grown large enough to have its participants follow an unspoken rule of tips and tricks (a modern example would be In-N-Out’s “secret menu,” where customers can order veggie burgers, grilled cheese sandwiches, and well-done fries). According to Ed Jacob’s “Ramen Nation,” general rules regarding “the perfect ramen shop” are to avoid:

1. Large ramen shops, as small ones serve smaller, more carefully prepared quantities;
2. Ramen shops with young cooks, as quality ramen *oyajis* (ramen shop proprietors) apprentice for years and are more likely to be old men; and
3. Fun, sociable ramen *oyajis*, as standoffish *oyajis* are probably more concentrated on the quality of their dish rather than generating a tip-inducing relationship with their customers.

But as popular as ramen may have been, its success was merely like that of a B movie compared to the level of stardom it gained when the instant noodle market made its debut into the growing instant food market.
Ramen, the Poster Boy of Asian Fast Food Culture

The man now known as “the father of instant ramen,” Momofuku Ando, created an equation truly deserving of the characteristic light bulb over his head if he and the later International Ramen Manufacturer’s Association were ever parodied by a cartoon series:

- America’s postwar wheat flour surplus
- Japan’s growing average income level
- + Japan’s nostalgia for black market Chinese noodles

Chikin Ramen, the first brand of instant noodles… ever. The noodles were an inevitable hit from the economist’s perspective, since Ando released his product in 1958 when Japan’s average income was comfy enough to pay for “the convenience and small luxury of not having to cook [every] meal from scratch” (Ayao 73). This major success can only be fully appreciated upon an exploration into Japanese and American fast food culture, where it is discovered that fast food in Japan, to the shock of many, began long before a pair of golden arches found its way over to Asia.

The Pacific War (1941–1945) forced Japan to eat just enough to survive. Afterwards, however, the country experienced a postwar economic boost which came with a surplus of food at its tail, a change that caused the average Japanese citizen’s consumption of food to increase gram-by-gram until the early 1960s. The government foresaw potential health risks with Japan’s sudden dietary change and encouraged consumers to decrease their consumption of animal fats. Japan slowly returned to its original low-fat, high-vegetable diet, but the thousands of fast food restaurants that were created to cater to Japan’s brief overeating fetish stayed around, a consequence that perpetuated the effect fast food would have on Japan years after older generations returned to their original vegetable-centered diets. And these fast food vendors were not strictly of the corporate franchise kind, either.

In “Eating is a Solitary Pastime,” Murakami Motoko argues that neither instant ramen noodles nor McDonald’s migration from the U.S. to Asia has successfully individualized the once intensely family-oriented meal in Japan. A unique combination of Japan’s surplus of food, an increased average income, and the creation of instant ramen converged to establish a unique environment more conducive to the creation of “other processed foods, such as instant coffee and granulated fish bouillon (dashi no moto), [which] began to invade kitchens across the country” (Motoko 207). Motoko also goes on to argue that this drift away from traditional eating habits actually began in the early 190s as well, before instant ramen even came into the picture. Though many would like to believe that the spontaneous creation of one single food item was guilty for the modernization of Asian cuisine, Japan endured its own unique circumstances independent of any modern acts of Western culinary colonization.

Unlike most studies which pin McDonald’s as the devil of Westernization in Asia, John Traphagan, like Motoko, explains that fast food culture was indeed long embedded into Japan’s history, and that McDonald’s later success in Japan was not because of the company’s push to exploit the Asian market, but because of Japan’s already fast food-oriented society. Japanese fast food began not with McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken, but with street vendors selling “steamed sweet potatoes, slices of chicken served on a skewer, roasted sweet corn on the cob, […] the boxed lunches bought at train stations or from vendors walking through the aisles of the trains,” and Yoshinoya, which has actually existed since 1899. This provides valuable insight into why the culture and lifestyle of Japan was so conducive to ramen and instant noodles in the first place.
Transnational food sharing is not the product of one country taking over another and imposing its culinary imperialism onto its victim nation, but a mutual exchange that comes from the similarities that exist between the East and West. In short, America was not a devil nation that planted the seed of fast food into the Asian continent. Both East and West experienced the birth of fast food culture for reasons beyond the magical creation of one restaurant or one food trend. Ramen is a sort of joint custody child of both Asia and the U.S., and each parent had to work considerably to ensure the success of ramen within its respective food market.

**Ramen, the Chameleon**

The metamorphosis from Momofuku Ando’s Chikin Ramen to Nissin Food’s Cup Noodle is an amazing one to explore. Instant ramen was originally created to mimic the soybean–flavored Japanese original, but when ramen traipsed into the States in the early 1960s (after Ando’s introduction of Chikin Ramen to Japan in 1958), America originally had a lukewarm reception to the import. Like the comparable mystique surrounding fusion foods today, “ethnic foods,” be it a simple visit to a local Chinese restaurant or a quick visit to a sushi bar, were a relatively risqué experience in the early 1960s, and because of each dish’s unfamiliar spices and textures, Asian foods in particular were considered especially exotic. When placing this into consideration, it is no wonder why the induction of *instant* ramen into the U.S. seemed to confuse American consumers at first. The idea that an “ethnic dish” could be made into fast food form was a hybrid apparently too futuristic for its time—“ethnic foods” in the early 1960s belonged strictly in an era where adventurous diners had to search to seek it, and the fact that these foods were now available at the neighborhood supermarket was just too strange. Compare this to the attitude the U.S. possesses now. Thanks mostly to the inception of Chinese fast food restaurants with the familiar one–, two– or three–item combination meal, the ethnic dining experience is not nearly as adventurous and rare as it was in years past. This quick desensitization of the ethnic eating experience is also the result of the efforts of various Asian food companies to create tastes that Americans were familiar with already. This explains why instant ramen was only successful once the dust had settled and, alas, when Nissin Foods began introducing flavors that catered to American palates.

The highest grossing instant noodle brand in America is Nissin Food’s Cup Noodle, which is now available in fifteen different flavors including Cheddar, Creamy Chicken, Shrimp Picante, and Spicy Chile Chicken (“Cup Noodles Variety”). In the 1960s, when Nissin Foods first detected America’s somewhat ambivalent reception of Cup Noodles, the company decided to create beef– and chicken–flavored versions of their original soy bean broth found in Japan. This move brought instant ramen into a more familiar, Americanized light that brought a sense of comfort to the then–conservative American tongue. Beef– and chicken–flavored instant ramen are a compromise between American tastes and an originally Asian concept, and though this move may appear overly fawning and obsequious on Nissin Food’s part to Asian food purists, tailoring a food product to match a certain culture is a process very familiar to ramen history.

**A Case Study in Cultural Adaptation—Nongshim**

In an article presented in the *International Studies of Management & Organization*, Suck–Chul Yoon provides a comprehensive case study into the marketing strategies that Nongshim, a Korean food brand, used to overcome the difficulties it faced when it first
introduced its cup noodle version to South Korea. The gargantuan success of Momofuku Ando’s Chikin Ramen in Japan not only inducted ramen into an unofficial culinary hall of fame, but also left neighboring Asian countries hopeful to procure the same measure of success. With this goal in mind, Nongshim released its own Chikin Ramen spin–off with the expectation of immediate applause. However, South Koreans paid a very unwelcome greeting to the new product, one that dealt an enormous financial blow to the budding brand. The failure almost completely toppled the Korean franchise, but in a move very much in line with the old “seven down, eight up” maxim Koreans have adopted since the country’s violent separation from Japan, Nongshim decided to try again after analyzing their product’s unsuccessful reception from a cultural perspective.

To South Koreans, the packaging itself was not quite right. The cup was “too Japanese”—it was much too narrow and handheld for a culture whose traditional sabal bowl is much larger and wider. Koreans eat with their bowls strictly on the table, while both Chinese and Japanese table manners allow bowls to be handheld. With this in mind, Nongshim decided to change the Styrofoam cup from the narrower Japanese version to a wider, more sabal–esque shape. Nongshim also realized that the majority of its small profits actually came during the snowy winter months, when Korean consumers were more likely to stay at home to cook rather than eat out. This made cup noodles a “cuddly” food—a meal made most delicious when Koreans could stay inside, warm their hands on the Styrofoam, and stick their faces in the steam (recall that Ando’s Chikin Ramen was also a “cuddly” food, as it allowed Japan to comfortably reminisce about the black market Chinese lo mein noodles of yesteryear). Nongshim understood that this would only work against the product’s success, so the company decided to change the brand’s advertisements to foster an “outdoorsy,” on–the–go personality to instant ramen, an idea that was so new and effective that South Koreans began to consider the product as separate from the Japanese cognate. Nongshim’s sensitivity to the cultural underpinnings of ramen eventually allowed cup noodles to find a unique place in Korean culture, and ramen in general has been an extremely successful food item ever since.

Another Case Study in Cultural Adaptation—Nissin Foods

Since ramen seems to have waltzed rather fluidly into Japanese culture, and since the story involving the Korean Nongshim brand seems like a fairy tale success in retrospect, it is easy to believe that little was needed to be done on America’s part to carve out a place for ramen in the U.S. However, a number of similarities exist between Japan’s and Korea’s efforts and Nissin Foods’ Cup Noodle brand in America. The newest flavors of Cup Noodle, Shrimp Picante and Spicy Chile Chicken are obviously non–Asian flavors as the words “Picante” and “Chile” are more evocative of Hispanic foods. The largest consumers of instant ramen within America continue to be the lower and middle classes, and because of the large influx of immigrants from Mexico and Latin America, a growing percentage of this socioeconomic class is comprised of people who assimilate themselves to “Chile Chicken” and anything “picante.” In this sense, Nissin Foods took their cultural adaptation one step further to cater to a very specific ethnic group within their American consumers. No matter how obvious these efforts at assimilation may have been, it was Nissin Food’s responsibility to present its market base with a product they were comfortable with having within their food pantries. And these efforts must have been effective in keeping and retaining their customers, since Nissin Foods continues to be the highest grossing instant ramen company in America.
In this sense, both Nissin Foods and Nongshim were pioneers in cultural adaptation. Many may argue that the “Americanization” of ramen detracts from its original cultural uniqueness, but when taking into account the fact that authentic ramen street vendors have still managed to hold their posts and retain a significant loyal consumer base even after the introduction of McDonald’s and other American fast food restaurants in Japan, not much really could have been done to blemish the authenticity of Asian cuisine. The only roadblock that has not been examined is the obvious health risk associated with a high–sodium, high–instant food diet. And it will be revealed that even hesitations by the American health community were quickly overcome and did not deter ramen’s continued assimilation into American culture.

Ramen, the Pariah

In February 2005, a lawsuit was filed against the Food and Drug Administration for not following through on a twenty–year–old promise to decrease the average adult’s daily consumption of salt. Sodium consumption has increased steadily over the past three decades, and medical resources have continually pointed the accusatory finger at this unhealthy increase as a partial explanation for the growth of heart–related diseases and incidences of hypertension in recent American history. The 2005 dietary guidelines recommend a maximum of 2300 mg of salt a day (equivalent to one teaspoon), but the Center for Science in the Public Interest (a watchdog group in support of the lawsuit against the FDA) asserts that the average American consumes almost two times as much. And ramen is infamous for its high levels of sodium since an average bowl, broth and all, contains about half the level of sodium an average American adult needs daily.

When analyzed within the context of America’s recent infatuation with lower–cholesterol and low–carbohydrate foods, this lawsuit should in theory have made ramen into a sort of culinary pariah. Instead, ramen’s popularity continued to flourish as vigorously as it did before. Though it is obvious that its place as an American staple food was not ensured by its acceptance into the world of health, the personal connection American consumers have with instant ramen simply came long before health criticisms arose. And by then America’s attachment to ramen was so established that regardless of the health issues raised against it, ramen was able to withstand the opposition and continue to grow in popularity. The existence of this budding emotional relationship Americans have with ramen is best demonstrated by the underground growth of ramen–inspired art and literature.

Ramen, the Muse

Andrew Mira, a seventeen–year–old student at the California College of the Arts (CCA), created a project that was a collaboration of different student submissions which used dried ramen with different artistic media. Mira’s ultimate desire was to illustrate ramen as a sort of indiscriminating cultural magnet for people of different ethnicities. While using Mira’s project as an argument for the emotional background of ramen culture, the article’s anonymous author discusses the idea that even though ramen is often seen as a symbol of poverty or a “punishment food” (as many in lesser circumstances cannot afford anything else), ramen is also a source of comfort as well. There are many people (including yours truly) who will consciously choose instant ramen over any other restaurant opportunity and cup noodles “over that can of Wolfgang Puck Basil and Tomato Soup.” Unlike many articles which are mostly critical of ramen’s association with the nation’s
poorer, less classy crowd, the anonymous author takes a minority view and explores the nostalgia and sentimentality behind ramen and how it extends beyond the boundaries of socioeconomic class. Because, after all, as the fourth–leading world consumer of instant ramen (“Outline of the International Ramen Manufacturers Association”), America could not have possibly been able to consume more instant ramen than many other leading Asian countries if ramen’s convenience were the only reason for its popularity.

Another example of ramen culture’s influence in art is the Japanese film *Tampopo*. The film takes place in Tokyo and follows the life of a young widowed noodle restaurant owner and a hedonistic truck driver who, together, attempt to create the ideal bowl of ramen while exploring the intricate joys of cuisine. The film also serves as an umbrella for a number of anecdotal “stories about the importance of food, ranging from a gangster who mixes hot sex with food to an old lady terrorizing a shopkeeper by the compulsive squeezing of his wares” (Tampopo). Since the film’s production was led by a Japanese director as a response to the importance of ramen within his own country, the movie provides an Eastern standpoint without the über–contrite refrain of “ramen = bad dietary choice” ever so prevalent in Western literature today. Ramen has created such a strong connection with its Japanese consumers that it has inspired the creation of a leader in a now–prominent food film genre. Food films like *Chocolat* and *Supersize Me* are not simply about a certain food culture itself, but are also intuitive, careful visions of the connections between people and what they eat. This underscores the fact that food is not only a powerful movement in the development of the arts, but that ramen is continuing to hold a meaningful niche in modern culture through its various artistic media—a surefire indicator of its ability to exist in a manner beyond the mere purchase–and–consumption relationship.

Ramen’s pervasiveness in both American and Japanese culture is also reinforced by the fact that a large fraction of ramen–related literature consists of articles that discuss the sentimental underpinnings of the food product. The writer Sandra Mizumoto Posey claims that, “ramen isn’t just a bowl of soup, it’s a place. In the end it doesn’t matter whether the noodles were fresh or reconstituted. The result is the same; food is part of how we define ourselves and our sense of home” (Posey). As evidenced by ramen’s rich history in Japan and its growing popularity in the States, the meaning behind ramen culture will not be limited to one or two socioeconomic archetypes for long. In the States, we often gauge a food product’s power by how much political pull it has (think Yoplait’s use of pink, feminine packaging to benefit the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation). With this in mind, it is especially interesting to consider the International Ramen Manufacturers Association’s efforts towards natural disaster relief.

**Ramen, the Good Samaritan**

About 200,000 pieces of instant ramen were donated to tsunami relief efforts in the Indian Ocean, 50,000 were donated to Hurricane Katrina relief funds, and 100,000 were donated to earthquake victims in Pakistan. The International Ramen Manufacturer’s (IRMA) disaster relief efforts reveal how powerful a relatively newborn food product can be on the global political landscape. The fact that IRMA has enough monetary and political pull to help in world disaster relief illustrates how gigantic of an industry ramen has become, and how powerful food politics can be when multiple nations and cultures collaborate to benefit the same cause. Not only is ramen a product with multifaceted meanings for multiple socioeconomic groups, but as long as umbrella organizations like
the IRMA continue to consolidate the growing instant ramen industry, ramen culture will be one of the largest players in the food politics game in both Asia and America. The fact that it is about eighty cents a meal or less and that both rich and poor, disaster–stricken and quiet suburban areas of the U.S. all consume ramen and will continue to do so, will only increase ramen’s political pull exponentially in the years to come.

Now that times are better for my family, we pay homage to Hana–Ichimonme whenever we get the chance. The familiar wave of nostalgia never really overpowers us until it is accompanied with the harmonious aroma of fresh ramen and the split–second moment where, right before we pick up our chopsticks, we exchange our traditional unspoken glances across the table. The experience means the world to me now that I have journeyed from the heights of one socioeconomic class to the depths of another and have found ramen culture, in some way, shape or form, waiting for me at the other end. Though my brother was not born at the time when my mother and I first began eating “Hello Kitty noodles,” we are happy to include him into our old tradition. Because after all, ramen culture, like our tiny family unit, is big enough to accommodate any change and remain as wholesome and precious as it ever was.
Appendix A

REGIONAL RAMEN

Part of what makes ramen so special is the infinite varieties that it comes in. Every locality has its own unique flavor, and if you have a ramen shop and a desire to experiment, there’s always a chance that the new type of broth or topping that you invent will start a craze that sweeps the nation. Here are some of the most famous varieties:

Hokkaido:

Asahikawa—Soy–flavored broth made with a seafood stock. Noodles have a low moisture content making them soft and easy to chew.

Sapporo—The birthplace of miso ramen. Noodles have high moisture content, making them chewy, and are of medium thickness.

Hakodate Ramen—Famous for its salt–flavored broth.

Tohoku:

Sanno (Akita)—Sanno ramen is made with water from the famous Izuruharabentenchi, a famous pond, which is said to make their broth especially delicious. Soy broth and fairly thick, curly noodles.

Yonezawa (Yamagata)—Yonezawa ramen takes a long time to make. The noodles are left to mature for about two or three days before they are boiled so they become very curly. Very soft, medium–size noodles.

Kitakata (Fukushima)—Known for its extremely fat, curly noodles. Extremely strong, thick–tasting soy broth.

Kanto:

Yokohama—Yokohama was the birthplace of ramen and there are dozens of shops around Chinatown. The noodles are extremely thick, and usually served in a tonkotsu–soy broth.

Tokyo—Curly, medium sized noodles in a clear, soy broth.

Chubu:

Hida–Takayama (Gifu)—Curly, thin noodles that are extremely soft because of their low moisture content. Soy broth made with tuna stock.

Kansai:

Kyoto—Known for its soft, straight, medium–sized noodles.


Shikoku:

Tokushima—Dark, thick–tasting yet sweet broth. Instead of chashu, they use butabara (stewed pork) and add a raw egg.

Kyushu:

Hakata—Extremely thin, straight noodles. Because they don’t put many noodles in your bowl, it’s okay to ask for a refill. The noodles have the lowest moisture content in Japan, making them extremely soft. Tonkotsu flavored broth.

Kumamoto—One of Japan’s most famous ramen areas. Noodles have low water content and are not as thin as in Hakata. Famous for its tonkotsu broth.

Kagoshima—Noodles here have their roots in both Okinawa and Taiwan, so there are two varieties. The Okinawan style noodles are very thick, while the Taiwanese variety is very thin. Tonkotsu broth (Jacob, Ed. “Ramen Nation”).

Tonkotsu (Jacob, Ed. “Ramen Nation”).
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