

Graduate Association for **Food Studies**

Title: Review of “The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze” by George Solt

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localized social histories that examine the roles individuals play in global trade.

Overall, Stobart provides a compelling case for treating eighteenth-century grocery purchases as driven by individual and personal choices rather than solely emulation. As a social history tracing the development of eighteenth-century retailing, *Sugar & Spice* successfully localizes and, thus, examines eighteenth-century global trade on an individual level. While global economics indicate increasing consumption of new goods like spices, sugar, tea, coffee, and tobacco, Stobart presents a compelling case for examining the local influences of individual consumers and sellers.

BOOK REVIEW | ARIEL KNOEBEL

The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze George Solt

University of California Press. 2014. 222 pp.

George Solt's ample narrative of the history of Japan's beloved national food traces ramen from its origins as the calorie-rich sustenance of Chinese immigrants and manual laborers to a fashionable worldwide craze. Solt begins his introduction with a comprehensive definition of ramen, paying respect to the variety of styles and regional characteristics, and moves on to discuss the ubiquity of ramen and the extensive documentation of its consumption in Japanese cultural texts. He speaks of ramen not simply as an evolving dish but as a lens to discuss food, labor, and Japan's changing national identity. Solt traces the cultural history of Japan through ramen's changing representations in popular culture but deliberately avoids examining ramen as a fetish food. Instead, he examines issues of global trade during Cold War and Japanese national identity.

Any reader can see through Solt's record that ramen is a dish worthy of its own narrative: It evolved from Shina soba, originally associated with manual labor, poverty, and Chinese immigrant identity, into a Japanese cultural export to cosmopolitan crowds across the globe. Solt uses the first three chapters to trace the dish's history. In the late nineteenth century, European imperialism directed cultural changes in Japan while migrant Chinese workers brought their food traditions to the quickly industrializing country.

Chapter 2 uses a well-researched analysis of declassified US government documents to discuss Cold War food rationing and the shortages in wheat and meat that caused the effective elimination of ramen from the Japanese diet. Chapter 3 changes focus to discuss instant ramen marketing and technology in Japan and examines many of the implications of ramen's popularity on both Japanese and American culture.

Chapters 4 and 5 follow the transformation of ramen into a Japanese national food and a globally iconic dish. One of the most remarkable parts of the story of ramen is the dish's staying power as a Japanese cultural staple and its ability to transform into a globally regarded culinary masterpiece. Solt places the Japanese Raumen Museum at the forefront of his analysis here, going into great depth about its creation and contents. He then expands his scope to the international scene, in which ramen has risen to popularity in recent years. In his final analysis of ramen's place in today's food world, Solt examines the continuing artistry and commitment to excellence of many ramen chefs but misses an opportunity to examine the social implications of the most recent ramen crazes outside of Japan from a consumer level.

This first section of the book feels rife with digressions and cultural analyses that lack strong context or connection to Solt's main argument. He offers strong descriptions of specific case studies—the Raumen Museum, the Nissin corporation, and popular movies and books—but provides few tie-ins to his central argument. These important pieces of evidence, which could have strengthened the thesis of the book, instead just feel like digressive stories with frail relation to the central theme. By contrast, the stronger second section includes much more appropriate readings of cultural artifacts, which relate to the main argument in a significantly more compelling way. Here, Solt describes the transformation of ramen into a fashionable object worthy of specialty shops and subcultures across the world.

Although Solt makes a compelling argument regarding the cultural relevance of ramen both in a historical and modern context, large portions of the book feel unaligned with the central point. Solt's work could have been divided into three separate books: a discussion of the historical cultural and labor changes in Japan through representations of ramen in popular culture, a comprehensive look at food rationing in Asia during the Cold War (when ramen was essentially removed from the menu), and a history of the instant ramen industry in Japan and the world. Solt's lengthy discussion of food rationing takes up a large portion of the book's content, causing the reader to miss

out on interesting evidence of ramen on the Japanese black market—a facet of the ramen story that is only alluded to and never discussed. Solt seemed to be stretching his evidence about wheat rationing in order to relate it to ramen noodles when records appeared to be much more about bread and other foodstuffs. He includes mere mentions of a black market for ramen but offers no further discussion of the cultural implications or history of this time period. Further research in this vein would have supported Solt's argument and engaged the reader further, in contrast to his digressive approach, which appeared blind to an important part of Japanese culture in the inter-war period.

Overall, Solt's account feels well researched and easy to read. The book is accessible and appealing to scholars and interested readers alike. However, *The Untold History of Ramen* falls short in fully utilizing this evidence to enhance the author's argument about ramen as a marker of cultural change in Japan. Upon concluding, the book leaves the reader with a general satisfaction regarding ramen's role in Japan's cultural supremacy but without a thorough understanding of exactly how that came to be.

BOOK REVIEW | ROBERT MCKEOWN

Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA Robert Ji-Song Ku

Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. 2014. 304 pp.

The last decade has seen a boom of interest in Asian cooking as well as a parallel increase in its availability around the world. One consequence has been the rise of dishes and cuisines that are not just available in the mainstream but ubiquitous. Within the borders of the United States they have come to represent a new category of foods: those synonymous with Asia but entirely part and parcel of a culture that is representative of Asians in America. This category has risen at a time author Robert Ji-Song Ku labels as defined by “trans-national flows of labor and capital, shifting geographic borders, flexible cultural citizenships, and fluid ethnic identities”—in other words, an era that demands new ways to discuss and define why and how we eat (1).

Set against a backdrop of fear for the waning of “authentic” Asian cultures and cuisines—especially outside their natural borders—Ji-Song Ku's *Dubious Gastronomy*:

The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in America asks what, exactly, does the Americanization of Asian food culture mean? Rather than lamenting the bastardization and ruination of so-called authentic foods, Ji-Song Ku relocates the very focus of authenticity by positing that there is an entirely new set of cultural politics at work: one which he labels with fondness and energy as “the dubious,” or more specifically something which has undergone a doubt-inducing, disrespectful (in the traditional sense) process of Americanization and, finally, transformation. In a series of critical explorations of Asian foods in America, he questions: Is authenticity an illusion? Or is it a trap? By refashioning the idea of authenticity in certain globalized Asian foods, he sets out to prove that, while Asian-American food cultures may appear less robustly “authentic” in the traditional sense, they are also more subtle and pervasive in their complexity than we may think.

Ji-Song Ku compares the Americanization of Asian foods to the pidgin form of any language and the traditional Asian food culture to a mother tongue. He underlines that the elevated status of any form of language only holds thanks to a certain political economy of communication. Indeed, this structuring philosophy plays a key role in the way he discusses food in both a cultural and political sense. This type of discourse, he furthers, rules all forms of culture, with the edible variety being no exception. He calls upon the oft-cited Arjun Appadurai, in his Letter on Authenticity, to underline the constant state of transformation at work within the boundaries of his object of study: “all cuisines have a history: tastes shift, regional distinctions go in and out of focus, new techniques and technologies appear” (25).

Spotlighting the tension between trend-driven cultural status and historically-rooted patterns of identification, Ji-Song Ku argues that if “the health and vitality of a cultural practice are directly connected [to trends, then] food culture in Queens is as important,” as equally meaningful, as the very existence of a cuisine at its gastronomic root—say, a laksa cooked in Penang or a miso paste-permeated soup in Seoul (5).

Dubious Gastronomy focuses on three cultures—Japan, China, and Korea—and takes as a series of taste cases some of their respective entries into the psyche and landscape of consumption in North America. On one level, this book is a cross-disciplinary exploration of food and culture (Asian and Asian-American); on another, it is an intellectual yet personal yarn from a lover of all things edible whose background (Korean-American) and places of birth and residence (Los Angeles, Manhattan, and Hawaii) play a clear role in the choice of topic. Ji-Song Ku mixes ethnographic