The Untold History of Ramen

HOW POLITICAL CRISIS IN JAPAN SPAWNED A GLOBAL FOOD CRAZE

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AMERICAN RAMEN AND "COOL JAPAN"

Restaurant-made ramen was unknown to most people in the United States until the 2000s. Americans not residing in a city with a substantial population of Japanese residents would probably still have difficulty finding a bowl in 2013, and those over forty might be reluctant to try it even if offered. Although American familiarity with instant ramen can be dated to the early 1970s with Nissin Foods' release of the Top Ramen brand, the restaurant-made variety entered American public consciousness only in the last decade after a number of news stories featuring successful shops in New York and Los Angeles appeared. In the United States, ramen arrived as a trendy, young ethnic food associated with a cool and economically unthreatening Japan rather than China. As such, the Japanese rebranding of ramen as a national food for domestic purposes between the 1980s and 2000s served a new function, allowing it to be packaged for export to foreign consumers eager to devour whatever could be imagined as "authentically Japanese" and had grown tired of sushi and teriyaki chicken. In the process, the "Japan" performed by Japanese for American consumption in places like New York ramen shops and the notion of "Japanese tradition" offered by young ramen chefs in Japan for domestic consumption increasingly merged into one symbolic and material

universe with tenuous connections to either the history of Japan or the history of ramen. Instead, a new realm of Japanese tradition was created through self-conscious repackaging of a comestible once understood as belonging to the domain of the beleaguered worker. The process pointed to the development of a new paradigm in the relationship of both young Japanese and non-Japanese people with the history of Japan, where sights, sounds, and tastes stood in for texts, events, and ideas. In other words, the ramen poems, Buddhist work clothing, and disciplinarian attitude of the chef were now sufficient markers to generate a sense of connection to the abstraction of national tradition, not only for foreigners mystified by the thought of the East, but even to Japanese themselves.

The ramen boom of the 2000s occurred precisely a decade after the peak of the trade wars of the early 1990s. The friction, which had been driven by U.S. frustration over the balance of trade favoring Japan, dissipated considerably in the late 1990s and 2000s as Japan's economy entered a period of prolonged recession while the United States recovered. In this period the U.S. mass media developed a newfound appreciation for Japanese popular culture in contrast to its traditional focus on the country's economy and high arts. In the process, Japan slowly shed its reputation as an "economic animal" (an appellation dating back to the 1970s) and gained a new identity as an incubator of fashion and cultural trends on par with Western Europe. The exposure of American youths to Japanese popular culture in the late 1990s and 2000s, in the forms of graphic arts (*Spirited Away*, Pokemon), clothing (BAPE, Uniqlo), and food (Nobu, Koi), contributed to the spread of ramen in U.S. cities such as New York and Los Angeles. Through this process of foreign export and globalization, ramen became a product of transnational hipster youth culture with an even stronger identity as a national food of Japan. Just as American rap music entered Japanese public consciousness through a subsection of fashion-conscious urban youths, ramen spread in the United States by winning over the young and trendy hipsters residing in gentrified parts of large cities.

The ramen fad of the 2000s in New York and Los Angeles took hold among a new generation of young Americans, many of them of Asian heritage, who had been thoroughly exposed to Japanese popular culture since childhood. Although ramen shops catering to Japanese tourists and expatriate businessmen had existed in Los Angeles since 1976 (Rāmen Kōraku) and in New York since 1975 (Sapporo Rāmen), the newer, trendier ramen shops catering to young Americans did not appear until the early 2000s. The "Japan" that these young people expected and encountered in the ramen shop, furthermore, was one already familiar through Japanese graphic novels and animated films, which frequently referenced food. The updated ramen shop that was imported to the United States contrasted strongly with the Japanese barbecue *(teppan yaki)* restaurant or sushi bar of an earlier generation: the Japanese chef was no longer to perform dinner as a show, or to make anything the customer pleased, but instead would do business on his own terms. Concretely, this meant refusing to speak English and using an artisanal bowl of noodle soup as a way to relate the value of his work.

In the United States, magazine articles on ramen often began with references to the film *Tampopo* and its intimation of the significance of ramen's place in Japanese food culture. The reverential treatment of ramen that Itami Jūzō had satirized in *Tampopo* was therefore the starting point for American engagements with Japan's now-nationalized noodle. The American coverage of ramen in the mid-2000s was also aided by the success of the 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, which presented audiences with the updated American portrayal of Japan as an international center of fashion, urbanity, and indecipherable comedy. In 2004 the free alternative newspaper the *LA Weekly* ran "Lost in *Tampopo*," which noted the growing interest in ramen among young trendsetters in Los Angeles. The role of one shop, Daikokuya, in introducing ramen to city residents was duly documented. Jonathan Gold, a food writer for the paper, notes,

> Most Japanese restaurants in the United States tend toward either Meiji-era gracefulness or the hypermodern Tokyo thing, but Daikokuya looks like a set from a 1960s Imamura [Shōhei] picture, decorated with rusted advertisements and faded postwar movie posters, furnished with straight-backed vinyl booths that seem plucked from ancient coffee shops, lubricated with endless mugs of Asahi beer on tap.
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> The cooks are probably working their way through USC film school, but they out-yakuza the yakuza behind their vats of sputtering liquid, sporting fierce tufts of beard, hair cut with an artful brutishness, and complex, reptilian tattoos almost alive beneath athletic sheens of sweat. A television blares

> at one end of the room, soap operas mostly. At lunchtime, the counter fills up with impossibly hip local high school students; after hours, you are unlikely to see clothing in any color but black—except for sneakers, which might as well be on loan from a rare-Nike museum. Even the menus, stained documents printed in a blocky midcentury font, look like relics from a junk shop. . . .
>
> If Daikokuya is the Asian equivalent of a neo-retro burger stand like Café 50s or Johnny Rockets, where all the signifiers are so artlessly reproduced that it seems hokey to anybody who may have experienced the original, I don't really want to hear about it. Because from this end of things, the restaurant feels exactly like Japan.[1]

Gold's insight with respect to the retro signifiers of the shop and the comparison to the artlessness of Johnny Rockets are both striking because they intimate a view of urban Japan as another version of the same rather than a vastly different space of the East. The appetite for consumable nostalgia is understood as a phenomenon familiar to both Americans and Japanese, and the author's own position in relation to the youth consumer culture of hipness offered by the ramen shop is one of eager participation and slight modesty. The descriptions of the workers and clientele also impart a basic knowledge of the symbols and stories of the Japanese underworld. In this way the ramen shop reflected the new image of Japan, which was a global center of taste making through design, food, and art.[2] Japan was cool now, and Americans were taking notice.

A buzz also surrounded ramen in New York City's East Village in 2004, when David Chang's Momofuku Noodle Bar and Kamada Shigeto's Minca Ramen Factory opened. Chang, a Korean-American chef trained at Craft Restaurant (co-owned by Food Network celebrity chef Tom Colicchio), opened what became the first American-style ramen shop using bacon, ham hocks, dark chicken meat, roasted pork bones, and sake in the soup base.[3] He appears to have named his high-end ramen restaurant after the acclaimed founder of Nissin Foods Corporation, who is discussed in chapter 3. Yet, like Andō Momofuku, who never acknowledged any connection between his choice for his company's name and the name of the wheat-milling giant Nisshin Seifun, Chang claimed that his choice of Momofuku was simply based on its meaning "lucky peach" in Japanese (another possible rendering of Andō's given name using different written characters).

In late 2004 the *New York Times* confirmed the arrival of an American ramen fad by running a feature with a half-page illustration and the title "Here Comes Ramen, the Slurp Heard Round the World" printed in large letters. As could be expected in a publication catering to an older crowd, a good portion of the piece by Julia Moskin was concerned with the fact that there was a difference between instant ramen and the restaurant-made variety, and that the latter was "fiercely beloved" by Japanese expatriates and "eaten with as much slurping as possible." Referring to the food as "Japan in a bowl," Moskin notes, "It is the national dish, cheaper than sushi, available everywhere and perpetually fashionable."[4] Like the *LA Weekly* article, the piece presents ramen as a food offering the opportunity for a concrete engagement with a fashionable, young, and urban Japan rather than the version associated with tea ceremonies and rock gardens.

The article also spotlighted the owner of New York's Minca Ramen Factory, Kamada Shigeto, who was a jazz musician in Japan with a penchant for tasting different regional ramen styles before opening his own shop. Kamada notes, "I only started making ramen here because I needed some to eat. I can't live without it." Moskin continues, "He is hardly alone."[5] The Raumen Museum–inspired idea that ramen was the beloved national food of Japan and that real Japanese people could not make do without regularly eating it was thus emphasized in the article. This type of coverage would not have been possible had ramen not already been transformed into an icon of Japanese food culture as a result of the books from the 1980s, the museum that opened in 1994, and the television shows featuring ramen chef celebrities from the early 2000s. Ramen's mutation into a national food in Japan allowed it to be marketed as a symbol of the updated "cool Japan" in the United States, as the category of "Japan" itself transformed into a marker of global youth culture. Japan's passion for ramen began to define Japan itself; the more the Japanese defined ramen in national terms, the more the nation became identified with the noodle soup.

One of the recurring themes in American writing on ramen was the slurping sound that Japanese people tended to make when eating the noodles. When writing about the popularity of ramen in the United States from the mid- to late 2000s, food writers were unable to resist pointing out the seeming oddness of the Japanese in slurping while eating and

thereby breaching European-American table manners.[6] In Japan, however, slurping is considered a practical way to eat something hot and wet without burning oneself or making a mess, and, when done correctly, it can be an impressive method allowing one to avoid burns and flying specks of soup. In the United States, the act continues to be understood as a sign of the cultural singularity of the Japanese.

The emergence of ramen fandom in New York and Los Angeles also took the form of store review websites, most prominently in the form of the Rameniac site launched in 2006 by Rickmond Wong, a native of Alhambra, California. Wong wrote reviews of shops in Japan, the United States, Britain, and Italy, creating the best-known American ramen review site in the likeness of the popular Japanese sites that had emerged in the mid-1990s. A profile of the blogger in the *LA Weekly* in 2009 noted, "Rickmond Wong considers himself a ramen shaman. . . . His blog is a strong argument for a ramen as a subject of higher education. *[sic]* He's already earned a P.H.D. *[sic]*"[7] Wong explained his motivations for launching the best-known American ramen website:

> I didn't initially conceive of rameniac as a food blog. When I was conceptualizing the site, I had no idea what a food blog was. I wanted to build a worldwide English-language ramen archive, something of a repository that people could reference if they were in the mood for a good bowl of noodles or simply information on the dish. I can't even take credit for the idea. There was a Japanese guy named Bon who had a site going up until about 2003. It's still online at http://www.worldramen.net, but I don't think he's updated his content in the last six years or so. And admittedly, his English is a bit choppy. There are probably around 80 to 100 ramen shops in Southern California currently. I'll get to them all eventually, but I'm in no rush. . . .
>
> As there are several new ramen shops opening in L.A. in the near future, we appear to be in the midst of a ramen boom. I'd like to think that my efforts have contributed in some part to that, to the education, the ramen-izing, of the English-speaking world.[8]

In an interview from 2010 uploaded to YouTube by the University of California at Los Angeles's *Daily Bruin*, Wong, an alumnus of the school, comments on the work of ramen blogging and the meaning of ramen for the Asian American community: "There's this kind of like Asian-American cultural thing to [ramen] too. I want to see like this kind of stuff infiltrate

culture on a level where it just becomes mainstream. Like pizza is mainstream. Sure, it's Italian, but everyone's into it. It's like, oh, that's cool. If you can kind of like create that in the minds of people, then they won't think of like Asia as this strange exotic place."[9] Wong understood his work of reviewing ramen shops, which he admitted could become a burden at times, as part of a greater effort to promote the mainstreaming of Asian American food culture. By extension, ramen was endowed with yet another purpose: making Asian Americans appear less exotic and foreign to their non-Asian American counterparts. In the process, ramen lost some of its specificity as a Japanese food with Chinese associations and developed into an object standing in for the ambiguous ethno-racial-cultural category of "Asian" in America.[10]

In one of his most spirited reviews, Wong evaluated the nouveau fusion shop Ramen California, run by celebrity chef Nakamura Shigetoshi. The shop opened in 2009 promising a new approach to ramen inspired by the freedom of California living, but it closed in 2011.

> Few places will ever go as far as Ramen California, which—and you read it here first—may well shape up to be the most groundbreaking new *restaurant*, not just ramen shop, in America today. . . .
>
> Starbucks-style portions of small, medium, and large ramen were introduced to the menu, and by the time I returned (yet again), diners could well craft their own "tasting course" of noodle samplers complete with wine pairings as suggested by the staff. It was off to the races when I ordered three minis: the "Heirloom Tomato," the cheese, and the "Marsala Curry Ramen." All were positively righteous in their own way; the tomatoes sparkled, the curry punctured the senses, and a reprise of the cheese tour-de-force confirmed my suspicions; it hadn't been a mirage at all.
>
> I asked the chef about the noodles. He mentioned a specific grade of semolina, typically used in pasta, to firm up his strands, and even the previously incongruous chicken soup began to win me over with its simple, austere charm. Ramen in Japan has[,] over the years, become all-too synonymous with "hiding the natural flavor of the ingredients," he explained. "I want to make things simple again."
>
> It's true that a bowl of ramen is normally assessed by its complexity of flavor and overwhelming profundity of taste. Measuring that has been this website's stock in trade; it's what keeps rameniacs going. Nakamura's California experiment[,] on the other hand, is a deliberate attempt to break free of the confines of a conformist Japanese mindset, the product of ramen

> royalty in self-imposed exile. Were the fare handled by less skilled hands, I might have dismissed the place outright as either gimmicky or a cynical stab at prestige. But instead Ramen California is world-class artistry—meticulous and daring, the most thrilling new restaurant in town noodle-related or otherwise. Its impact on the landscape could be huge.[11]

Ramen California's short run as the fashionable new fusion restaurant for ramen occurred at the same time that Wong ceased updating the Rameniac site with ramen reviews. In one of his last postings, in June 2011, Wong noted that for health reasons he was eating much less ramen and had taken to a Mediterranean diet. As indicated by the self-anointed shaman of ramen's turn toward couscous, a new phase in the evolution of ramen in the United States had begun to unfurl, marked by a diminution in hype and self-consciousness by Americans eating the food. In addition, the shortening lifespan of the fashionable ramen shop was a phenomenon that transcended nation, occurring in both the United States and Japan at an increasingly rapid pace starting in the mid-2000s.

At the same time that a younger generation of Americans such as David Chang and Rickmond Wong worked to introduce ramen to Americans, Ivan Orkin, a native of Syosset in Long Island, New York, took up the challenge of opening the first American-owned and -operated ramen shop in Japan (with his Japanese wife and brother-in-law). Inspired by the film *Tampopo,* Orkin developed an interest in opening a ramen shop after visiting David Chang's Momofuku in New York and attending the Tokyo Ramen Expo.[12] Orkin, a chef of French cuisine in New York, decided to try his hand at making his own ramen, which consisted of handmade noodles and a "double soup" that combined seafood and chicken broths, a formula that had become fashionable in Tokyo in the mid-2000s.

Orkin first encountered limited success with his restaurant, which opened in June 2006. His fortune turned around, however, when he attracted the attention of the Demon of Ramen himself, Sano Minoru, who visited with the crew for his television show *Gachinko!*[13] Orkin had generated a small buzz by appearing on other television programs for interviews, and Sano was ready to shine his spotlight on the American chef making Japanese ramen. Describing the televised encounter between the American ramen maker and the Demon of Ramen, Orkin noted:

> He came into my shop with lots of cameras and two members of a popular boy band. Like every other TV show I'd appeared on, the bit began with the visitors reacting in shock to the sight of a white Western face behind the counter. I waved my hand, said "Hi," and tried to keep up while they peppered me with questions about the whys and hows of opening my shop. Then it was put up or shut up. I made three bowls of shio ramen and handed them over the counter. . . .
>
> He didn't smash the bowl or scream that I was a fake, and I, for my part, managed not to cry.[14] The show constituted his nod of approval, and it more or less elevated Ivan Ramen to the top tier of Tokyo shops. If I'd worried before that my success would be temporary, that it was a fluke, that was the moment I convinced myself that I'd done something real. A wannabe ramen chef from New York had made good in Tokyo. The crowds continued to flow.
>
> Sano Minuoru did make one suggestion during his visit. Leaning over the counter, his cameras off, he told me I should consider increasing the water content of my noodles by 1 percent. Then he congratulated me on my success, rounded up his crew, and left.
>
> The next day, I tried it. He was right. The ramen tasted better than ever.[15]

Although Orkin was far from the first non-Japanese to run a successful ramen shop, he was the first American to do so, which made him a predictable target for Internet publicity and reality television coverage in Japan. In his 2009 book *Sano Minoru's Ramen Revolution,* Sano backhandedly praised Orkin's shop as the "Black Ship of the Ramen World," alluding to the unwelcome visit by Commodore Matthew Perry's U.S. Navy squadron to Japan in 1853.[16] Sano notes that Orkin "even writes 'homemade noodles' on his New Year's card, instead of 'Happy New Year,'" exhibiting a disregard for Japanese New Year ritual sensibilities (akin to writing "artisanal pasta" instead of "happy holidays" on a Christmas card).[17] Sano continues, "He should add more water to his noodles" and "use more ingredients in his soup."[18] In concluding his evaluation of Orkin, Sano praises Ivan Ramen's *chāshū* pork, admitting that the French restaurant training had given Orkin a competitive advantage in handling meats, and writes, "Coming from abroad to start a ramen shop of his own, he is getting along well with his neighborhood shop owners. I admit I like this guy Ivan."[19]

In 2008, Orkin published an autobiography in Japanese, *Ivan's Rāmen,* joining the ranks of other ramen chefs with self-published books contain-

ing their philosophy about ramen.[20] Orkin's celebrity reached new heights, however, with the release of his own line of instant ramen in 2009 in collaboration with Sanyō Foods' Sapporo Ichiban line. Sanyō, which distributed the brand nationwide, sold out of the 300,000 units it produced in less than a month, making it the fastest-selling instant ramen in the company's history according to Orkin's autobiography.[21]

Orkin's shop drew attention in the United States as well. In 2007, a *Wall Street Journal* article featuring Orkin and his shop in Tokyo, Ivan Ramen, ran under the headline "Trying to Out-Noodle the Japanese."[22] Reflecting on his reputation as the American ramen celebrity of Japan, Orkin notes, "I know that I am a big attraction. I'm a gaijin, and I'm from New York."[23]

The success of Orkin's noodle-making venture in Japan encouraged him to set his sights on New York City's East Village, where he had initially been inspired by the innovations of David Chang. As of late 2012, Orkin was planning to open a fifty-seat megashop in the East Village, claiming, "The kind of ramen I'm going to do, New York hasn't even heard about yet."[24] The full impact of Orkin, the American ramen chef stamped with the Japanese establishment's seal of approval, has yet to be seen, but it is clear that Hollywood-style ramen chefs have entered the culinary consciousness of foodies in the United States as a result of the shops opened by the likes of Orkin, Chang, Nakamura, and Kamada.

In 2011, the first text dedicated to the appreciation of ramen appeared in the United States, a full three decades after the first full-length book on ramen was published in Japan. The first American celebrity ramen chef, David Chang, launched the food journal *Lucky Peach* with an inaugural issue devoted to ramen. Soon after, the issue became a collector's item that was sold for more than $300 on eBay, while other back issues of the journal sold for an average of $8. In the journal, David Chang and food writer Peter Meehan engaged in a personal exploration of ramen with graphics and anecdotes about the authors' experiences traveling to Tokyo. National Public Radio (NPR) subsequently interviewed Meehan about his "irreverent look at cooking from all over the world."[25] Meehan explained that the creators dedicated the first issue of *Lucky Peach* to ramen because of David Chang's restaurant and the food's importance in Japanese culture. Referencing a famous scene from *Tampopo*, he comically pontificates,

"You're gonna slurp those noodles, you're not chewing them, you're not cutting them up, you're trying to inhale them like a human noodle vacuum, and they should slurp in a pleasing way. And then that broth that they're served in, it should dress the noodles, it should coat the noodles, it should flavor the noodles. It seems like the simplest thing for a bowl of noodle soup to do, but when you're in front of a bowl and that's happening . . . you're most of the way there."[26]

Again, when discussed by Americans, ramen was unable to escape the Tampopified language and fetishistic imagery that Itami had satirized, and perhaps unwittingly standardized, in his first and only "noodle Western."[27] In addition, the NPR story repeated the inescapable adage about the frequency with which American college students ate ramen and how different the restaurant version was from the instant version of the food. 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. By relating the deep significance of ramen to the Japanese (evinced by *Tampopo*, of course), the coverage invariably reinforced the image of Japan as a land defined by ramen, and ramen as the definitive dish of postwar Japan.

Similar to *Rāmen Daisuki!!* by Shōji Sadao, David Chang's special edition of *Lucky Peach* is a collection of celebrity monologues and comic illustrations loosely organized around the appreciation of ramen. The issue includes a travelogue of Chang and Meehan's visit to Tokyo to eat ramen and an article by Anthony Bourdain on David Chang's career as American ramen trendsetter, among other articles. Readers are informed that Chang, like the rameniac Rickmond Wong, worked as an English teacher in Japan while learning to eat ramen but did not actually learn to speak much Japanese in the process (as is typical of many Americans living in the country).[28] In the style of *Dave Barry Does Japan*[29] and other popular travelogues written by Americans who feel empowered by their status as Americans in Japan, the first chapter in the journal, "Things Were Eaten," highlights Peter Meehan's experience being received as a VIP in Tokyo by top-rated chefs and bartenders with David Chang as his guide. Meehan draws attention to the vending machines dispensing alcoholic

beverages, the displays of menus in the form of plastic food in front of restaurants, the clean automatic toilets, the gangsters with missing pinkies, and other well-worn aspects of life in Japan that foreigners unacquainted with the country never tire of writing about. Furthermore, Meehan, a former food writer for the *New York Times*, admits his sense of being lost and overwhelmed upon learning of the New York restaurant world's relative provinciality during his first trip to Tokyo.[30] Flaunting his lack of interest in understanding Japanese sensibilities and standards of politeness, Meehan gleefully writes about how he ordered so much food that he couldn't finish it at famous shops, and how he met Yamagishi Kazuo, a legendary ramen chef and inventor of dipped ramen *(tsukemen)*, without comprehending his significance in the Japanese ramen world or why he was treated with such reverence by his staff.[31] A photograph of David Chang passed out drunk on the floor in front of a closed restaurant inside of a high-end building attests to the irreverence of the authors.

"Things Were Eaten" is also illustrative of the expectations that first-time visitors to Japan entertain based upon their exposure to the updated image of Japan as "cool." For instance, Meehan visits the ramen shops of Tokyo expecting to observe what he calls "ramen fashion." He notes, "I'd thought that this issue would include a Ramen Fashion Notebook, detailing all the crazy shit people in Japanese ramen shops wear—the ramen cooks in New York all wear different and slightly outlandish headwraps, and often some variety of rain boots or galoshes, too. But the couple at Aoba [ramen shop] was simply, even maybe fashionably, attired in nicer-than-just-practical cotton garments, like they shopped at the R by 45 rpm store in SoHo. Nothing funny or weird about it. So my ramen fashion idea died there."[32] Meehan's expectation that he would find a bizarre land of head wraps and galoshes was therefore betrayed by the banality of the actual people living in Japan.

As in so many articles written about Japan (or any place in the so-called non-West) by the cliché-prone food writer, in Chang and Meehan's work the audience is familiarized with the same half discoveries that reveal more about the writer's self-referential point of view than the actual social organization to be encountered in their destination. Although this can be understood as part of a long trajectory of American writing on the charms of the exotic East, the same clichés often take on a life of their own and

reverberate among the Japanese (or non-Westerners) themselves, becoming incorporated into a part of their self-definition over time. The *samue* worn by ramen chefs since the 1990s and the Japan-inspired (or Japanish) decor of newer ramen shops at places such as Ippūdō in New York fall into this category.

Anthony Bourdain, whose hit television show on the Travel Channel, *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, earned him an Emmy in 2010 and a role as of one of America's best-known celebrity chefs and food critics, wrote a quip-loaded meditation on David Chang's career as the American ramen pioneer in the article "Chang," published in the first issue of *Lucky Peach*. Bourdain interprets Chang's career through three films that he argues stand as parables for the life trajectory of the English-teacher-turned-ramen-chef-extraordinaire. The first is, obviously enough, *Tampopo*, which, according to Bourdain, encapsulates Chang's discovery of ramen. The second is Ōbayashi Nobuhiko's 1977 horror comedy *House*, in which "one discovers the shocking precursor to what has been referred to as the 'post-noodle epiphany,' at which time Chang and his collaborators 'departed from the script,' so to speak, and began a new phase of recipe development." He continues, "David Chang's post-noodle phase answered a question that no one had asked. No one in New York had expressed a yearning for Japanese/Korean/Modernist/Southern-Americana Fusion. Much like Ōbayashi, had Chang revealed his plans prior to dropping them on an unprepared public, he would likely have been dismissed as insane. These eerie parallels, and his earlier residence in Japan, lead me to believe that Mr. Ōbayashi's filmic work is a clear and continuing influence—the blueprint for Chang's ascent."

The third is the 2008 film *Ramen Girl*, in which Bourdain locates "sheer autobiographical parallels" with the life of David Chang.[33] Bourdain explains:

> The Momofuku empire predates this cruelly underappreciated independent film. And yet, watching it, I couldn't help but think: was it coincidence or something else that this heartwarming tale of a young American's apprenticeship to a seemingly cruel and demanding ramen master was made exactly when Chang's star was on the rise? And was it coincidence that Brittany Murphy's character, Abby, has her breakthrough when she—like Chang—dares to defy convention, to dig deep, to take what she has learned

from her teacher and move forward into uncharted territory? I think not. The story is too close to Chang's. And while Brittany Murphy might not have been the ideal choice to play the lead, it is his story just the same.[34]

The parallels between the plot of *Ramen Girl,* an independent film directed by Robert Allan Ackerman, and the life of David Chang are indeed striking. Released in 2008 and shot mostly in Japan, *Ramen Girl* starred the late Brittany Murphy as Abby, an American woman who develops a passion for cooking ramen under the apprenticeship of a stubborn middle-aged Japanese chef played by Nishida Toshiyuki. After developing her own style of ramen, named "Goddess Ramen," which includes peppers, corn, and tomatoes, Abby returns to New York to open a shop of her own named Ramen Girl. Despite the film's lack of success at the box office or in the DVD market, it was an important milestone marking the evolution of American depictions of Japan in popular culture, as was David Chang's restaurant and the ramen phenomenon of the 2000s in general. What distinguished *Ramen Girl* from other American feature films set in Japan (*Last Samurai, Memoirs of a Geisha,* and even *Lost in Translation*) was that it was shot in Japan with Japanese characters who spoke Japanese rather than broken or accented English. This was a breakthrough in American cinematic representations of Japan, and it was a dramatic departure from films with characters such as the Japanese widow who falls in love with the American who kills her husband (*Last Samurai*), the Japanese geisha who falls in love with the American who rescues her from the brutality of Japanese patriarchy (*Memoirs of a Geisha*), and the Japanese actors who serve as stage props or as jokes in and of themselves (*Lost in Translation*). The differences were not lost on the film's star, Brittany Murphy. When asked by the *Japan Times* how the film compared with *Lost in Translation,* Murphy noted, "It's different in terms of plot, plus—and I really like this—it has more local actors in it. If you think about it, 'Lost in Translation' didn't have very many Japanese in roles that were significant. It's like Tokyo was more of just a background to that movie. In 'Ramen Girl,' Japan is more than a background, it's . . . well, it's part of everything in the movie, and I'm in the middle of it. It's great!"[35]

As evidenced by the appearance of celebrity chefs, specialty critics, publishers, and filmmakers interested in ramen, the birth of ramen appre-

ciation in the United States in the 2000s took much the same form that it did in Japan in the 1980s and 1990s. The ramen critic Rickmond Wong, the celebrity chef David Chang, the journal publisher Peter Meehan, and the film director Robert Allan Ackerman all heralded the ascension of the food to a new level of fame in the United States, just as enthusiasm about ramen was showing signs of waning in Japan. The fact that David Chang and Peter Meehan published the inaugural issue of *Lucky Peach* in 2011, a year after Raumen Museum founder Iwaoka Yōji published *The Day That Rāmen Disappears,* lamenting the twilight of passionate ramen consumption in Japan, illustrates the lag in ramen fandom between the United States and Japan. Reversing a pattern that had held until the early 1990s, Japan was now generating the popular cultural trends that American youths were following roughly a decade later, not only in terms of food but also in fashion and coiffures. Japan's era of "soft power," or benign cultural influence abroad, however, peaked in the mid-2000s and was quickly overshadowed by the "Korean wave" that followed it into the United States (as evidenced, for example, by "Gangnam Style").