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Getting to the Bottom of the Bowl

Ramen is a popular Japanese noodle soup dish. It has increased in popularity over the last few decades and has expanded globally for everyone to experience this dish. In many places in Japan, ramen is a main food staple for them as it's a quick and easy dish to make and prepare for consumption. So, typically if we were to ask a Japanese native as to what was the origin of this dish, they would most likely say that it's traditionally from Japan and that the Japanese curated this dish. However, that statement wouldn't be entirely true because there's actually a major part of history that's missing from this. That part is the fact that the Japanese ramen was actually a Chinese inspired dish. Despite many Japanese people believing that it is a purely Japanese dish, a vast majority of historians have actually concluded that it's highly likely that the dish came from Chinese immigrants. In contrast, one common thing amongst these authors that don't align with each other is, when did the Chinese start integrating this dish into the Japanese society. Many sources are in the range between the late 1800s and the early 1900s. The credibility of these sources will help determine which time period would be more accurate. It'll also show as to why so many Japanese people of today only refer to ramen as a pure Japanese dish.

There are two documents that look into the origin of ramen to actually be around the late 1800s. The name of those documents are The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze by George Solt and an article from the New Yorker, "The History of The Ramen Noodle" by Sophie Brickman. Both of these pieces of work chalk up the origin of ramen to coming during that time period. In the book The Untold History of Ramen...

Solt basically discusses how after the American imperialism there was an influx of Chinese immigrants and tradesmen that entered into Japan's society. The imperialism also brought in a heavy western influence due to their own foodstuffs entering the Japanese land. One of the main foodstuffs that has an influence in the creation of ramen was the amount of wheat and pork that had been brought over. The Chinese tradesmen that we're skilled in cooking had a noodle soup called lā-mien which Japanese refer to as Nankin soba, the soup was simple and didn't have many added toppings. So it's assumed that eventually after eating this dish for many years, the Japanese decided to make the dish into more of a quick meal than a side dish. In the New Yorker article, Brickman states the same thing as the book and basically goes through part of the evolution of ramen from that point and how it became commercialized and entered into many different markets globally. The only issue that arrived in this case of origins is the major leap from a plain version of Nankin soba to the more "decorated" version of the ramen dish served today.

These next two articles have a different standpoint of the timing of which ramen was "birthed" from. These articles are named "Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan: New Styles and Old Patterns" by John W. Trapagan and L. Keith Brown. The other is called "Eating The World: Restaurant Culture in Early Twentieth Century Japan" by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka. These two articles basically state that ramen had first been introduced through Chinese immigrants a couple of years after the first Sino-Japanese war. In the first article, the authors explore how Chinese worked to integrate their dish into the Japanese market such as the dish first being called shina shoba to show its relation to the Chinese, however it was later on referred to as ramen. The article also compares the Chinese inspired dish to other western food

markets such as McDonald's in terms of how well they integrated these businesses to adapt to the Japanese climate. The Chinese noodle soup dish had an easier time, as the lettering for the Chinese was similar to the Japanese, so it felt less foreign to them. In addition to this, the dish itself was pretty cheap which would entice the Japanese customers even more. The next article basically touches on the same point, but basically talk about how the Chinese noodle soup spread throughout Japan from eateries opened up by Chinese immigrants and also discussed lightly on the toppings that they added on the ramen such as slices of pork and laver. Later on in the article, it's also assumed that Japanese people also began to take the mantle in these shops and through that would be able to develop their own version of the dish. These articles give a better connection to how the Japanese eventually began to make their own twist on the Chinese inspired dish.

It would seem as if the origin of ramen would more likely be in the early twentieth century due to the evidence presented throughout all these articles. The last two articles that were brought up held more evidence to back up as to why it was likely for the ramen to develop during that time. One piece of evidence that was stronger in the last two articles is how they discussed what terms the ramen was initially referred to as, from shina soba to Chika soba to make the dish more for the Japanese and less degrading for the Chinese as during this time the term "shina" was offensive towards the Chinese. Also, the setting made it practical for why the Chinese wanted to open up eateries around Japan, since they just came out of a war it seemed it was the best situation for Chinese immigrants to make money. However, while looking over all the documents it seems like the articles have more of a relation between them rather than differences. For example, they are both centered around Chinese immigrants adapting their food

into Japanese taste. Also, how the soup dish actually came out after the sino-Japanese war. Through this analysis, it could prove that these two stories are connected. Meaning that the first one about it being first brought up during the 1800s could've been true that the Chinese had a dish similar to it and only began to adapt it to the Japanese palette when they began opening more eateries in the early 1900s. So as it stands this analysis would be the best explanation for the origin of ramen.

The last thing to discuss is why the Japanese have moved away from giving the Chinese recognition in creating one of their most infamous dishes. One of the main reasons that was gained from piecing events together is all the wars the Japanese and Chinese had against each other and their relations to each other due to these wars. One of the main reasons as to why their relationship had become so bad was because the Japanese didn't want to own up to war crimes they committed against the Chinese and tried to bypass it as if it never happened. The Japanese felt that the Chinese were the reasons they had these wars in the first place, so they had little empathy for giving them a hard time in admitting the stuff they did. All this tension can make the Japanese not to relate something such as ramen, which is a big part of their culture and society to the Chinese. Also, it's very possible that the Japanese may have felt that they've added so much to the original dish derived from the Chinese that it's basically their creation. The Japanese people believed they made it into a better dish for Japan. Lastly, the Japanese have a very strong national pride, so once something is remotely theirs they tend to hold it to their nation and their nation only. Even certain sections of Japan have pride in specifically that section of Japan. So, it's not uncalled for that the Japanese would act this way about their ramen.

In conclusion, the truth is that the Japanese ramen that Japan has so much pride in is actually a Chinese inspired dish and they should do more to acknowledge that aspect of the dish.

However, they can take pride in how ramen has turned into a global craze and has filled the belly of millions with its quick and easy to make process.

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