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Author(s): Satomi Fukutomi

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CONSUMING NOSTALGIA IN A BOWL OF NOODLE SOUP AT THE SHIN YOKOHAMA RĀMEN MUSEUM

Satomi Fukutomi
University of St. Thomas

Welcome to the year Shōwa 33 (1958). Our museum brings you back to your childhood. In this reconstructed town from the past, you can enjoy regional variations of rāmen and recover something that was lost during the rapid postwar economic development.¹

In the wake of the collapse of Japan's economic bubble in the early 1990s, nostalgia for a specific era began to suffuse Japanese consumer culture. In 1994, the Shin Yokohama Rāmen Museum (SRM) opened to aid the development of Shin Yokohama, a relatively new business center outside of Tokyo.² The SRM is a site that "sells" nostalgia for the Shōwa 30s (1955-1964) and the Japanese hometown, or *furusato*. The museum's curator, Iwaoka Yoji, creates this nostalgia via the "national dish" of rāmen. Rāmen, a noodle soup of Chinese origin, is widely available throughout Japan as fast food for the masses. While rāmen's distinctive features of commonplace and foreign origins are often excluded from nationalistic narratives, these characteristics are an integral part of how rāmen has become a nostalgic object and even a national symbol in the museum.

Nostalgia for the Shōwa 30s began in Tokyo in the 1980s, via its appearance on television as well as in comics and other popular media (Sand 2006:90). Around the same time, other eras, such as Edo (1600-1867) and Taishō (1912-1926) were also being commodified through nostalgic media, such as theme parks and museums. By the 1990s, these eras as nostalgic subjects had become strongly conceptualized and highly marketed.

¹ This excerpt is taken from the Japanese language brochure (my translation) of the Shin Yokohama Ramen Museum. The phonetic spelling of the museum is actually "Shin Yokohama Raumen," but I use the spelling "Shin Yokohama Rāmen Museum."

² The station is located twenty-one miles east of Tokyo Station.

What sets the decade of 1955-1964 apart from the others is that, in contrast to Edo and Taishō, when Japan possessed military and colonial power, the Shōwa 30s was a period when Japan was recovering from its defeat in the war.

Re-imagining the Shōwa 30s during the recent period of economic downturn is an implicit critique of the Japanese “bubble economy.” Much has been written about the feeling of “homelessness,” the vague sense of anxiety and emptiness that has pervaded Japan since the 1990s (Creighton 1997; Robertson 1998). In this chaotic period following the economic recession, disturbing social phenomena, such as bankruptcy, unemployment, and the breakdown of paternalistic corporate relationships have led to a national identity crisis. The SRM uses an idealized, reconstructed slice of the past to provide an antidote for the crisis and chaos of contemporary Japan and a remedy: a steaming bowl of noodle soup served in a town that has long ceased to be, if it ever existed at all.

A previous study of the SRM by Jordan Sand (2006:105–107) which focuses on nostalgic components—a snap shot of the museum (the postwar virtual town)—describes the artificiality of the museum’s nostalgia. While rāmen shops are part of the old town world permeated by nostalgia, for example, they have an entirely different atmosphere from it. He highlights disconnecting rāmen shops and shop employees to the nostalgic milieu rather than scrutinizing the linkage between rāmen and Japan that allows the food to be an object of nostalgia. Moving beyond Sand’s analysis, this study examines the museum as a site of nationalism, regionalism, *and* nostalgia. This study also explores how the museum creates a social space through its artificial reproduction of rāmen as a nostalgic reminder of postwar Japan. Henri Lefebvre argues that absolute space is “imaginary,” however it also has a social existence (1974:251). As with the SRM’s virtual town, the reality of a space is dependent on the perceptions of those who inhabit it. This study will ethnographically illustrate how the social space allows the visitors to travel between past and present and experience collective nostalgia.

Making Rāmen a Japanese National Food

Rāmen has been consumed in Japan for over a century since its introduction in the early 1900s. In the decades before the Second World War, its street stalls gradually disseminated outward from ethnic Chinese neighborhoods, entering Japanese lower- and middle-class foodways. By the end of the 1970s, rāmen was recognized as an unofficial “national food”

(*kokuminshoku*). In magazines, *rāmen* was presented as a food for everyone: the blue-collar working class, bar hostesses, physical laborers, middle-class families, and office workers who wanted to go out for a quick meal that was inexpensive (Anguru 1979).

During Japan's rapid economic growth in the 1980s, *rāmen* became labeled "B-grade gourmet"³ (*B-kyū gurume*), a term that refers to inexpensive food transformed into an object of connoisseurship (Sand 2006:105). By the end of the 1990s, a new wave of upscale *rāmen* shops had appeared that sought to minimize *rāmen*'s image as a convenience food. By the new millennium, the relative merits of both new wave and more "traditional" types of *rāmen* shops became a subject for the *rāmen* aficionados who had appeared among the legions of office workers, consuming and creating meaning-systems along with their noodles.

The creation of the SRM represents an institutional recognition of *rāmen* as a "national food" of Japan. A national food, Katarzyna Cwiertka argues, is "an imagined national identity and cultural homogeneity" (2006:12). Rather than material aspects, such as a food's origins or ingredients, a national food is defined by collective ideology. Hence, *rāmen* can be considered "Japanese" even as the word "*rāmen*" itself is written in *katakana*, the Japanese script for words of foreign origin. The complex relationships between a food's meaning, its origin, and its nationality become even more complicated due to culinary globalization. Finally, in addition to its ideological elements, a national food must be: "everyday" acceptable, affordable, and available.⁴

The museum brochure discusses *rāmen* as a Japanese national dish, only mentioning its Chinese origins in passing.⁵ The curator's greeting in the brochure (in the epigraph) aestheticizes the baby-boomers' childhood and encourages visitors to experience a feeling of loss. *Rāmen* is not aestheticized as loss, per se, but as an instrument for inducing the sense of

³ The "B" of "B-grade" derives from the term "B-movies" (Sand 2006:97).

⁴ I draw these elements of acceptability, affordability, and availability from Foster (2008:87), who considers them to be essential characteristics of marketable global commodities.

⁵ Explanations in foreign languages (Chinese, English, and Korean) that introduce *rāmen* as a folk dish and a Japanese national dish with only brief mention of China are inserted into the brochure.

loss necessary to create nostalgia. Narratives such as the museum brochure play an important role in constructing rāmen as a “national” dish.

Conversations about rāmen as a national food of Japan often lapse into the discourse of Japanese exceptionalism called *nihonjinron* (“theories about the Japanese”). One of the museum employees I interviewed claimed:

Japanese people like hot food high in carbohydrates and cooked in fat or oil. I think this tendency is probably programmed in Japanese DNA. For example, we also like *don-mono* (rice bowl dishes) like *tendon* (tempura on top of a bowl of rice). The difference between rāmen and *udon* or *soba* (other Japanese noodles) is that the latter are not cooked in fat or oil. Actually, *udon* is quite tasty with a little oil in the broth...There is nothing remaining of original Chinese food characteristics [in rāmen]. Today, Chinese people consume rāmen as an authentic Japanese dish” [my translation].

Though he does not go so far as to discuss rāmen as a biological need for the Japanese, in mentioning a possible DNA connection this employee makes an overt linkage between rāmen and national characteristics thereby creating Japanese collectiveness. The divorce of rāmen from its Chinese origins is made complete in his final assertion that the Chinese eat Japanese rāmen.

In his interview in a business magazine, Iwaoka Yoji, the curator and the founder of the SRM, explains his idea to make rāmen a food for nostalgia (Katsumi 2005). Iwaoka balances the construction of rāmen as a national food of Japan with the recognition of rāmen as a regional food. Its possession of regional variations gives rāmen the “folk” status that qualifies rāmen as an appropriate object for nostalgia and for the museum. To justify rāmen as a regional, folk food, Iwaoka organized visits to over a thousand regional rāmen stalls throughout Japan. It took him years to convince some chef-owners to open shops in the museum: many perceived themselves as craftsmen, hoping to perpetuate their rāmen in an unchanged fashion, rather than businessmen looking to expand their business outside their home grounds. Another reason for their reluctance may have been that they did not know Iwaoka at all and were skeptical of the legitimacy of his project. Not only might they have considered it a scam, but also they may not have

considered *rāmen*, the mundane food of their trade, to be an appropriate subject for the intellectual site of the museum.

The inclusion of voices from across regional and class borders distinguishes the SRM from most conventional museums. Iwaoka was openly critical of the “elitism” of other museums, which privilege upper- and middle-class cultures and audiences through their selection, display, and interpretation of exhibits that represent and appeal to the culture of those classes (Karp 1992). In contrast, the SRM selects the decidedly non-elite food of *rāmen* to target a wide range of visitors—from small children to elders and working class to elites, in multiple ways. First, the SRM offers a minimal fee and has long hours of operation (11:00 am–11:00 pm).⁶ Even busy office workers have a chance to enjoy its nostalgic atmosphere and regional *rāmen* on the way back from their work. Second, nostalgia is presented in the frame of the combination of education (the exhibition of the history of *rāmen* in Japan) and cuisines (regional *rāmen* available at *rāmen* shops and as souvenirs at a retail shop), which I dub “educuisine.”⁷

The retail shop sells packages of *rāmen* of a wide-range of regions and other local specialties called *meibutsu* (“famous regional items”), and *educuisine* is prominently showcased everywhere in the museum. Each region (towns, cities, or prefectures) has its own special representative food or product that is internalized by residents as part of their collective identity. These *meibutsu* may include locally grown or processed vegetables or fruits, *manjū* (sweet dumplings) and *ekiben* (“station boxed lunch”). *Manjū* made in all regions are almost identical to one another in its appearance, ingredients, taste, and package. The only difference is a regional “logo,” which is usually the name of places stamped or marked on *manjū* and its wrapping paper.

Likewise *rāmen*, which is relatively a new inclusion to *meibutsu*, is available in a similar manner throughout Japan. *Rāmen*, however, differs from *manjū* in two ways; regional *rāmen* slightly differ from each other in terms of the presentation, the subtle taste and ingredients in terms of

⁶ The SRM charges ¥300 for adults and ¥100 for children. The average entrance fee for other Japanese museums is between ¥900 and ¥1,500, and their average hours of operation are from 9:30/10:00 a.m. to 4:30/5:00 p.m.

⁷ This neologism is patterned after Millie Creighton’s (1992) “edutainment” (“education” and “entertainment”).

creativity rather than locality. Second, it is not regional “logo,” which makes rāmen *meibutsu*, but it is rāmen, which transfers unknown places into tourist sites. Rāmen is not *meibutsu* of particular places, but innumerable places have their original rāmen as *meibutsu*.

The virtual town, or *furusato*, also constructs rāmen as a symbol of Japanese nationalism. *Furusato*, literally “old village,” is commonly understood as “hometown,” but the simplicity of this translation belies its complex usage in texts such as literature and music. *Furusato* is more of an emotional space than a physical one. Jennifer Robertson explains *furusato* as a native place, “not a particular place, but rather the generalized nature of such a place and the nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention” (1998:115). Christine Yano conceptualizes *furusato* as an imaginative place to which one’s heart belongs, where one wants to be, but cannot go (2002:174).⁸ *Furusato* is certainly “hometown,” but is afar physically or emotionally. It is not one’s literal hometown, but a place that has been left behind to which return is impossible.

These interpretations of *furusato* fit Svetlana Boym’s description of nostalgia, illustrated by her description of immigrants’ sense of home. Though they long for their original countries, they do not think of going back there permanently. She writes, “To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world” (Boym 2001:251). The inability to return home becomes an enabling force for immigrants to be successful in their “new home.”

The SRM presents *furusato* through replicas of families from the Shōwa 30s based on Iwaoka’s and his parents’ childhood memories of the town that existed before Shin Yokohama.⁹ Although the museum claimed to recreate the year 1958, some of its images derive from Iwaoka’s childhood memories of the late 1960s (Katsumi 2005). Iwaoka (b. 1959) grew up in

⁸ The Japanese poet Muro Saisei’s famous poem about *furusato* also demonstrates the impossibility of return: “One feels *furusato* just because it is far from the person or his present. It is not the place to return.” (*Furusatowa toku-ni arite omōmo...kaerutoko ni arumajiya.*)

⁹ The name “Shin Yokohama” came after the opening of the bullet train station; prior to that, it was part of Yokohama city.

the neighborhood and bore witness to the radical metamorphoses of the town: from community vegetable farms to an urban center with a bullet train station, and finally to a “new” business town. Iwaoka disappointedly notes that as the town became economically rich, it became a “stranger” to local peoples (2005:54). Opposed to the initial plan of building a parking structure in the town, Iwaoka successfully opened the SRM to convert the newly “strange” town into *furusato* based on his memories, which happily coincided with those of other middle-aged Japanese people. The SRM’s *furusato* thus represents “a site of memory” – a location where memories crystallize (Nora 1989) – for Japanese people. As history suppresses and destroys actual memories, these sites of memory play host to narratives wherein memories are “recovered” (Rubenstein 2001:6).

Memories and sites of memory may also be intimately related to nationalist sentiments. In the 1990s, nostalgic memories of the postwar period became an arena for the production of a revived Japanese nationalism. The post-bubble 1990s are often discussed in terms of “crisis,” due to “the sudden malfunction of the “Japanese system” [of politics, economy and culture]” and the moral panic arising from the “deviance” of younger Japanese (Yoda 2006:16-21). The emergence of nationalist nostalgia in the 1990s is a sort of national coping mechanism.¹⁰

Rāmen as Regional and Folk Food

Visitors to the three-story office building in which the SRM is housed encounter a bundle of regionalism and nostalgia within its compressed time and space (Figure 1). In the first floor, the “*purorōgu zōn*” (prologue zone), a large wall map of Japan¹¹ introduces regional rāmen shops with geographical information about the size and population of cities and prefectures in which they are located as well as details of the regional characteristics of the noodles and the broth. Instead of the common word

¹⁰ The popular *anime* (“cartoon”) *Chibi Maruko-chan* (aired from 1990-1992), based on the bestselling *manga* (“comic”) of the same name by Momoko Sakura [Miki Miura], features everyday aspects of 1970s. Another nostalgic *anime*, *Heisei Tensai Bakabon* (1990) was a revival of an *anime* from the 1970s; it showed everyday details from the Shōwa 30s, although some of these were mixed with those of the following decades.

¹¹ Approximately 1.7 meters by 4 meters (5.6 feet by 13 feet).

chihō (“local” or “regional”), the word *kyōdo* (“folk”) is frequently used as a means of historicizing *rāmen* in a home and familiar manner (Figure 2).

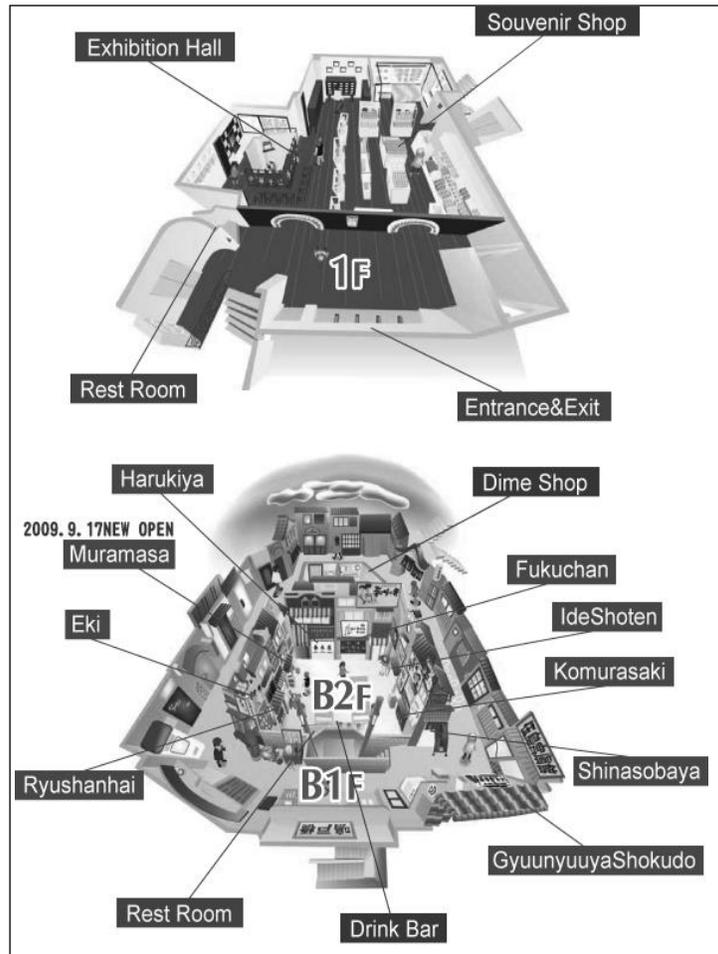


Figure 1. Floor map of the Shin Yokohama Rāmen Museum
 Source: Shinyokohama Raumen Museum Corporation (2009)

The partition between the retail shop and the exhibition area features another map of Japan with the invitation, “*anata no machi no kyōdo rāmen oshiete!*” (Teach us about the local rāmen of your town!) (Figure 3). Visitors write the names of regionally and locally famous rāmen shops on the map, giving descriptions of particular flavors. The map is covered with visitors’ “graffiti.” A large sign welcomes visitors to the exhibition area, reading “*Kyōdo Rāmen: kyōdo ni nare shitashinda rāmen eno himitsu*” (Folk Rāmen: Stories of the Birth of Regional Rāmen).

In the back of the first floor, a history of regional rāmen shops is presented on another panel of the same size and a television screen showing a documentary. The film features interviews with owners, employees (usually the owner’s family members are the main workforce for small family-owned shops) and regular customers of various regional rāmen shops and their history. One elderly man sits at the counter table and waits for his rāmen; he tells the camera that he has come to this rāmen shop for forty years. He continues, “Unlike this, [pointing at the current owner-cook] the previous owner [the cook’s father] was a grumpy folk, but he cooked very good rāmen, too.” The films emphasize the ways in which those rāmen shops are rooted into their regions and appreciated by local residents by being integral parts of neighborhoods and their customers’ everyday lives.

The *meibutsu* rāmen is available in the virtual town of the Shōwa 33, the *Taikan zōn*. The virtual town of the two basement levels is an imitation postwar town featuring actual contemporary regional rāmen shops. The town interweaves past and present, the illusory and the real. The stairways from the first floor to the basement represent portals between the present and the past, a liminal space where these temporal settings are interlaced. While their walls are lined with vintage advertisements of various products, as if they were narrow alleys from the Shōwa 30s, juxtaposed with these posters are luggage lockers, reminding visitors that they have not yet stepped entirely into the past.

At the base of the stairs, the actual entrance to the past, virtual town, is a replica train station; having traveled back in time, the visitor has arrived at their destination. Yet, even in the town of 1958, there are pockets of actual, present-day Japan: the rāmen shops. The town distinguishes between spaces of past and present by using the contrast of light. Imagine that the virtual town is inside a planetarium: stars appear in the ceiling and the lighting is kept to a minimum. The past lies in the early evening time while the rāmen shops are situated in the present, as indicated by the bright light streaming from their interiors. By walking into its illuminated interior,

a museum visitor steps between worlds; as though flipping a light switch, visitors step out of the dusky Shōwa 30s into the well-lit present to have a bowl of soup, after which they step out again into the darkened, virtual town of yesteryear.

The Shōwa 30s, Rāmen, and the Hometown

Shōwa 33 (1958) was chosen to represent the year of the visitor's "childhood." Iwaoka elucidates that the initial aim of the museum was to create nostalgia for his childhood memory of the bond of solidarity and the collectiveness in his tenement neighborhood (Katsumi 2005:56). Rāmen is a perfect lure to draw visitors into this solidarity. The majority of rāmen shops used to be in residential areas and formed integral parts of neighborhoods in which residents shared community activities (Bestor 1990). Rāmen shops offered a welcome alternative to nightly home-cooked meals and an easy option for entertaining unexpected visitors. A particular rāmen shop may have served these functions for neighborhood residents for generations.

The year of Shōwa 33 was not selected at random. First of all, 1958 was in the middle of Japan's first economic boom since before the war. The American occupation was over, and it could be seen as a time of national pride. Second, although the SRM does not openly recognize it, 1958 was the year in which Ando Momofuku, a Taiwanese immigrant, invented instant rāmen.¹² This is significant not only for the rāmen, but for what it represents. On a national level, the existence of an industrial rāmen product expanded the consciousness of rāmen beyond the regional food; a Japanese consumer in the Shōwa 30s began to realize that rāmen was available all over Japan.

On an international level, with the invention by a foreign-born Japanese citizen of a food product that became popular worldwide, 1958 represents Japan's entry to the age of global food. Finally, as the year before Iwaoka's birth, Shōwa 33 has a personal meaning for the museum's curator (as well as for any other visitors born in the Shōwa 30s) of a simpler

¹² Ando's company, Nisshin Shokuhin, is not only the producer of the first instant rāmen product, Chikin Rāmen (chicken rāmen), but also the products that made instant rāmen a success in the United States: Cup O' Noodles and Top Ramen.

time in a Japanese town, prior to the economic booms of the 1960s and 1970s and the concomitant rise of large-scale construction projects and foreign institutions such as convenience stores.

The nostalgia of childhood is highlighted by the immediate temporal elements of the museum's virtual town. To emphasize its associations with family, home, and mother, Iwaoka chose to set the installation in the early evening. Iwaoka describes the early evening as the time when parents took their children to a public bath and the aroma of supper hangs in neighborhoods (Katsumi 2005:55); this time of the day is clearly a nostalgic hour. The early evening carries a symbolic meaning of an ideal family life, as it is possibly a peaceful time of the day when family members get together after work or school.¹³ Through the set of the early evening in neighborhoods, Iwaoka successfully offers visitors memory and national food.

As part of "living together," visitors stroll through the town and participate in a variety of animating activities, such as buying snacks in friendly neighborhood stores (Figure 4), playing classic games (i.e. non-computerized, such as ring-toss and picture-story show), and joining town events, such like singing contests and quizzes. By becoming residents of the virtual town and interacting with others, visitors experience a sense of collective nostalgia for a time when neighborhood meant community rather than a collection of individuals united only by geographical proximity. However, at the same time, the visitors know that the town is not real.

In the town, images of "residents" demonstrate collectiveness: a policeman, a grandmotherly owner of a mom-and-pop candy shop, a neighborhood association chief and his daughter, a photo shop owner, and a stationmaster. The town offers visitors a "home" of friendly adults,

¹³ The early evening is also a key concept in Japanese cinema, nostalgically symbolizing the family. "San Chōme no Yūhi" ("Sunset on Third Street") (2005; 2007) illustrates ordinary families' daily lives in the Shōwa 30s. "Kazoku Gēmu" ("The Family Game") (1983) describes family issues that "typical" families faced in the 1980s during Japan's rapid economic growth. A home tutor makes the middle-school student Shigeyuki practice Japanese words that he missed in his test; he writes just one word, dusk (*yūgure*) on multiple pages. Although there is no explanation of Shigeyuki's intention, presumably dusk represents his family and his nostalgia for childhood.

especially *obachan* (aunties; middle-aged women who resemble wives of small store owners or good neighbors in their manners) who are reliable figures in the neighborhood. These residents somatically enact “postwar memory through their bodies” (Igarashi 2000:5). Together with the participation of visitors, these images collectively refigure the postwar “ideology through nostalgia” (Stewart 1993).



Figure 4. A neighborhood store in the virtual town

Visitors may fulfill their nostalgia not for the postwar period, but for childhood. I heard the conversation between a mother and her children; the mother in her early 30s picked up candies from a display counter and told her children that she used to eat these candies on her way back from school. Although she would not be born until decades after 1958, the virtual town made her feel nostalgic for the candies of her childhood. As Boym warns “danger of nostalgia,” in which people confuse the actual home and the imaginary one, regardless of the time period in which these candies were made, the mother felt that the virtual town of 1958 was her own (Boym 2001:xvi).

The recreated town¹⁴ is like a stage where not only employees act as 1958 residents, but also where visitors are expected to feel as though they are be part of the stage. Small children are acting residents almost naturally while adults seem to try blending into the atmosphere. Rather than acting as a resident, I focused on my research by asking the employees about foods that were served, busy times of the day or days of the week, and types of visitors. Because I was not engaged in “the stage” of the Shōwa 33, I put the employees in an ambiguous position between being residents of 1958 and museum employees in the new millennium. Perhaps as a result, the ways in which the “residents” of the town spoke to me or looked at me widened the distance between us; I felt that I was in a neighborhood without being a part of it. Thus, I was relieved as I opened the *rāmen* shop *noren* (shop curtains) to “return back” to the present: in this space I was neither pressured “to be [a] resident” of the past, nor made to feel guilty for not being so.

Rāmen shop *noren*, the emblematic “doors” of *rāmen* shops, mark the boundaries between the past and the present in the SRM (Figure 5). These shops function as the places where time and space connect past and present, virtual and real. A ticket machine at each *rāmen* shop allows customers to choose their bowl of *rāmen* and get ready to enter the present. Visitors are physically in the virtual town while they wait to purchase their tickets, yet their minds may be travelling to the present. The exterior of the shops represent the past and the shop facades are in tune with their retro surroundings. The interior consists entirely of familiar appurtenances of contemporary *rāmen* shops and contemporary *rāmen*. Upon entering the shop, conversations among the patrons predominantly focus on the visceral experience of the food rather than on nostalgic reflection. In this particular arrangement of past and present, Sand claims the artificial connection of *rāmen* to Japan’s postwar nostalgia (2006:106-107).

¹⁴ In some respects, the virtual town resembles Colonial Williamsburg in America by offering visitors a virtual space in which they become living instruments of history. In terms of surface area, Colonial Williamsburg (301 acres) is about 1,000 times the size of the Shin Yokohama *Rāmen* Museum (approximately 0.3 acres). Colonial Williamsburg is not only an educational facility, but also a business enterprise, integrating hotels, restaurants and advertisement.



Figure 5. *Noren* of Hachiya rāmen

The museum is a site of nostalgia and nationalism that is based on Iwaoka's individual longing for the neighborhood of his youth, projected onto the virtual town and transformed into collective nostalgia of postwar Japan among the museum's visitors. Although childhood memories may not be the same for visitors of different ages, memories of rāmen serve to link them and create a common ground. This popular contemporary food is nostalgically charged through its visual presentation and narrative construction. Not only does rāmen become a material facilitator of nostalgia, it connects people through implicitly nationalistic narratives. These narratives are tied to images of Japan's prosperity, such as the growing economy and the increase of leisure activities.

The SRM constructs nostalgic narratives to sell the past for public consumption. As argued by Anthony Giddens, "Memory is about organizing...the past in relation to the present," (1994:63) and Millie Creighton, "[we] re-create the past in the present to serve present need" (1997:242), the past is a construct of the present. The museum offers a

virtual experience, approximating the one sought on domestic tours to “Authentic Japan” (Ivy 1995) without leaving the city. Visitors supposedly take a nostalgic tour of Japan in the Shōwa 30s. Just as the artificial, in the proper context, can appear more authentic than the actual place itself (Yamaguchi 1991:66-67), the aesthetic experience of rāmen allows visitors to enjoy working within the dialectic of the fake (virtual town) and the “real” (rāmen shops in the town and the retail shop). By generalizing the home to an impossibly transregional hometown, offering rāmen of regions across Japan, the virtual town set in an idealized past may better represent Japan for the SRM’s visitors than any actual village possibly could.

Conclusion

Owing to its foreign origins and working class associations, there was no inherent quality for rāmen to become an official Japanese tradition or an official traditional food. Yet, it was chosen to facilitate national nostalgia for “authentic” Japan in the SRM. Upon close inspection, however, this museum, targeting Japanese people of all regions and classes, offers rāmen shops as a temporary “escape” from the nostalgia of a virtual town. By slurping noodles and broth, visitors are at once returning back to the physical, present reality and imbibing nostalgia of the past. Leaving the shop, they return to the virtual town and the collective past; leaving the museum, they return to the present, nourished both physically and emotionally. Rāmen, as a comforting material object, complements the nostalgic comfort presented by the museum’s displays. Regardless of the intended effect, rāmen in the museum is both an object associated with nostalgia and a convenient food to sustain the visitors’ bodies.

Food, though a fact of everyday life, is also an important constituent of memorial events and may be an expedient for the production of nostalgia or nationalism. Rāmen, as opposed to more traditional Japanese cuisine, was chosen as the subject of the museum owing to its appeal across a wide range of consumers, as opposed to the more ritualistic, elitist food. Due to its non-official status rāmen has not been considered an important icon of Japanese history, but the SRM situates rāmen in an institutionalized historical frame through regionalism and the concept of home. The museum introduces rāmen as a culinary landmark of Japanese nationalism and nostalgia. By consuming this foreign-originated noodle soup in the mythologized Shōwa 30s setting, visitors enact a nostalgic narrative, transforming a decade in which the Japanese were connected through their suffering of the hardships of postwar construction, which appeared in

Iwaoka's reminiscences. This particular decade, via the commonplace food, was recast as an antidote to the Japanese economic "chaos" of the 1990s, which has continued into the millennium.

As Martin Parker (1998) argues, for nostalgia to become part of mass culture, it should not be associated with elitism. The SRM utilizes rāmen as popular culture to dissociate the elitist notions of nostalgia and nationalism in the period from 1955 to 1964. By minimizing the distance between nostalgia and the mass consumer, Iwaoka challenges Japanese social conventions; by offering rāmen as an unofficial national food, the museum helps fill the highly publicized emotional void that opened in Japan in the 1990s. Modern forms of globalization have inexorably changed lives around the planet by altering its values and landscapes. In response, localized and commodified forms of nostalgia have risen to fill the gaps between the unfulfilling present and an imagined past. Nostalgia creates a longing for the past out of memories believed to represent a more fulfilled society, and its ambiguity allows it to become an instrument towards capitalist ends, as described by Arjun Appadurai (1996:78). The SRM exploits the ambiguity of rāmen as an unofficial regional and national food to lead its visitors across the amorphous boundaries between the actual and the virtual, past and present, memory and nostalgia, in order to transform the material good of rāmen into a panacea for contemporary malaise.

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