

Momofuku Ando's Impact on Japan with His Instant Ramen Invention in 1958



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Introduction

Japanese instant ramen has been a major invention in the 20th century and is serving millions of people all around the world. When tracing its roots in Japan, there is plenty of evidence suggesting the instant noodle ramen market has seen major developments since World War II. In this essay, I will explore why instant noodles were able to achieve success in 1958, the year this new type of noodle was born, and the socioeconomic background of the factors that allowed it to prosper. I will also look at the invention from an entrepreneurial viewpoint in identifying the factors that led to success for Momofuku Ando, the businessmen who invented instant ramen. His initial success was with the invention of Chicken Ramen 1958, and he then founded Nissin Corporation which later became the giant food processing company that now dominates the world's instant ramen markets.

Instant ramen entered the world at a time when the Japanese economy was reaching its high-growth period. People began to be more preoccupied with their work, making them more eager to find a food that could be quickly prepared and quickly eaten. The Japanese love of noodles, particularly ramen, is as strong today as ever it was.

Background Knowledge & US Involvement

In trying to address the issue of why instant ramen had the market to expand in Japan, it is essential to understand the situation inside the postwar Japanese household. During World War II, Japan and the Japanese economy was being hugely drained of its resources and in the aftermath of the war the nation's self-perception was low because it had lost so disgracefully. People in Japan were starving during the war, though the aftermath was not much better for them either. Cities were unable to provide relief for starvation and to help those in need (<http://www.magiminiland.org/BigPicture/PostWarJapan.html>). The Japanese people desperately needed a pragmatic solution to the problem of food shortages and starvation. Though the United States was willing to help, its intentions were to alter the eating habits of the Japanese by importing wheat and

shifting them toward a more bread-oriented culture (www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/imperialism-colonialism-food-industry-east-asia-focusing-instant-ramen).

Ando Envisions Instant Ramen

Given this situation, Ando was determined to find a way in which he could preserve the Japanese diet at the same time as addressing the problem of starvation and malnutrition. In his biography, he claimed that his inspiration for creating instant ramen came from a scene in which he saw people willing to stand in line for a few hours in order to buy a cup of ramen, which reflected both their lack of food and their love of ramen in particular at that time. Ando envisioned developing a new type of ramen that one could cook more quickly and easily, and which could be mass produced, to help alleviate the scale of starvation as the direction to take ("How Momofuku Ando Invented Instant Ramen – and Transformed Japanese Cuisine" by Phil Edwards, *Vox, Vox*, Sept. 29, 2016). He envisioned a creation that would embody the people's cultural ties to traditional Japanese ramen while at the same time fitting suitably into the reconstructed postwar society.

Birth of Chicken Ramen

After several attempts, Ando was finally able to come up with his first instant "Chicken Ramen" which became a big hit. Why was it so successful? There were two main factors. First, the Japanese at this time needed a product that would help them preserve their cultural identity as the US implemented import policies that would have changed the Japanese diet. Instant ramen could be viewed as an alternative to bread, as it is so easy to make, and would also utilize wheat, an imported food source from the US. This product enabled Japanese households to be more efficient in dinner preparation but at the same time remained a distinctly Japanese food.

Secondly, Japan society was at a stage of expecting change after the US occupation. The massive restructuring of Japanese systems, both economic and political, made Japanese society more prone to

accepting changes. The emergence of instant ramen was a significant reflection of this Japanese desire for a change in lifestyle and growth, with a huge knock-on effect on marketing and supply. Prior to this the only places to get a bowl of ramen were ramen shops or other restaurants. Ando's creation greatly expanded ramen supply by making it available on the shelves of supermarkets and convenience stores. Though simplifying the time needed for preparation, he refused to compromise on the taste of the new ramen. He insisted on incorporating the elements of traditional ramen, such as salt and soup, to enhance the flavor of his new product, and indeed expanded the varieties of ramen available to customers. His vision of instant ramen being rich in flavor while easy to make was indeed revolutionary.

Ando's Entrepreneurial Success

It is also interesting to see the creation of instant ramen from an entrepreneurial perspective. In order to understand its success, it is necessary to understand Ando's personality and character. He was a person of tremendous creativity and energy. Some have described him as a person who never gave up and was always greatly optimistic about the future. His experimental approach of "trial and error" is now regarded as a model for other inventors. His tenacity certainly won him success and eventually wide recognition, as he was determined to create something that would be loved not only by the Japanese but by people generally ("Cup Noodles Slurping Strong, 45 Years On" by Shusuke Murai, *The Japan Times*, Aug. 22, 2016).

He saw that a lot of societal problems came from a lack of resources including food and there were great inequalities involving a lack of distribution of them. With the success of his instant ramen concept in 1958, just over a decade after Japan surrendered in the war, he helped revive the spirit to persevere during hardship and faith in Japanese culture. That period of starvation, US occupation and social change gave him the historical platform to contribute to the peaceful future he envisioned. As Ando himself noted: "People can only be content when they have enough food."

Cup Noodles – Another Entrepreneurial Success

Ando's passion for entrepreneurship was not exhausted in 1958. When he traveled in the US in 1966, he thought that Americans should also experience the pleasure of eating instant ramen and began thinking about exporting instant ramen to the US. But as chopsticks were rarely available in the US, he started thinking about instant ramen in cups that could be eaten without chopsticks. By pouring boiling water into cups containing solid noodles and other ingredients, they could enjoy instant ramen without chopsticks, just like having coffee. This was convenient for busy American businessmen or construction workers who needed to have lunch quickly. Thus, many Americans fell in love with it, and Momofuku Ando became one of the most well-known Japanese entrepreneurs in the US as well. He was 61 years old when his company Nissin started selling cup noodles in 1971. He lived to the age of 96 and to see his creation become the phenomenon it remains today. **JS**

Shenger Zhou has been a visiting scholar at Keio University from Boston University. He was born in Shanghai, but has studied abroad in different countries, including the United States and Japan. He aims to be a young entrepreneur in both addressing and solving the problems of the 21st century.