Twitter Thread by Patrick McKenzie

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This lunch is 500 yen ($4.80) at Sukiya, a Japanese fast food restaurant which belongs to a category with about three big competitors.

I love the aesthetics of this category and they’re under remarked upon.

I think people underestimate QSRs in terms of social utility, but Sukiya et al describe themselves as mission-oriented enterprises. I believe this is largely sincere, and goes back to the 60s and 70s, when the clientele was primarily manual laborers who had migrated to work.

Japan was not a rich nation at the time, and day laborers in particular were both unlikely to be able to cook for themselves and unlikely to have much of a food budget, and so the chains sprung up offering an honest-to-goodness cooked meal delivered in under a minute for cheap.

This heritage continued over the years, even after Japan became a much more wealthy nation, and these chains function as social support and dignity for folks in diminished circumstances.

They also are a wee bit of a cartel, and I appreciate the aesthetics of the cartel:

Back when I was first in Japan, in the mid 2000s, there was an increase in the price of beef.

And the heads of the three chains got together, and decided that the price of the basic beef bowl needed to increase, but given the economic circumstances how could they hold the line.

And what they came up with, from memory, was:

“We are very sorry, given the economic environment, to raise the price from 165 yen to 180 yen, but we are doing our level best to keep it there, and have mutually decided that approximately one yen of margin is appropriate.”

(That dish is, 15 years later, about 350 yen here. I thought there was a +/- 250 yen option still available, and the mini size is around there, but historically the political economy of the dish was based off that offering. I’m slightly disappointed seeing it at 350.)

Oh a fun foodtech (really!) thing I wish caught on more in the US:

If your offering is “I plate a bit of five big pots of things I cooked in the morning and keep heated as serving temperature all day” you can get the offering almost arbitrarily cheap.

Explains bowls, curry, etc

It doesn’t take more training to prepare rice than it does to prepare a McDonalds burger but by definition the only thing in rice is rice, and the only thing in the egg is egg, etc. (There’s a bit of seasoning/sauce on the beef, prepared centrally. Only prep here is heat + plate)