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# Oodles of Noodles: The Story of How One Dish Traversed Asia

Miriam Cohen  
mecohen@pugetsound.edu

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# Oodles of Noodles: The Story of How One Dish Traversed Asia

Miriam Cohen  
University of Puget Sound

## Popularization of Noodles

Noodles have remained popular in Asia for a variety of reasons:

- ❖ Noodles are easily personalized
- ❖ External forces such as war and government intervention
- ❖ Noodle tourism in Asia
- ❖ Instant noodles developing in conjunction to fresh noodles



Pacific Rim Study Abroad Program students Kamila, Gabby, Sara, and Sophie (left to right) eat noodles at night market outside of Hwa Nan Women's College in Fuzhou, China.

## Noodle Culture

The establishment of noodle culture in the five Asian countries of study can be broken down into three categories: countries that have established their own specific noodle culture, countries who have a fluid definition of what noodles are theirs, and countries without an established noodle culture of their own.

China, Japan, and Thailand fall under the first category because they can all point to distinct noodle dishes as their own. This is obviously applicable to China as noodles were first invented there. Since their creation, noodles have spread all over China resulting in a wide variety of well established local varieties of noodles. Japan has five main national dishes (ramen, udon, soba, yakiudon, and yakisoba) which can vary regionally, but not to the degree that they do in China. Thailand is a bit of a middle ground between these two nations in that it has both regional specialties (khao soi) and national dishes (pad Thai and pad see ew) that are eaten commonly.

Malaysia has a more fluid definition of what noodles are "Malaysian." There are three significant populations of ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—as a result of British colonialism, and the cuisines of each of these groups complicates what exactly Malaysian noodles are. Finally, India has no established noodle culture as noodles are always labeled "Chinese," and never "Indian."



Pork ramen from ramen shop Honke Daiichiasahi in Kyoto, Japan.

## Why Noodles?

How noodles have adapted to several Asian cuisines is a testament to their flexibility and also a way in which to gather insight on the cultures they encounter. Noodles have stood the test of time and their evolution tells more than a recipe, but the stories of nations as well. The resilience and malleability of noodles have allowed the dish to persist all throughout Asia, as well as act as a mirror of the nations they are incorporated into.



Noodles are the ultimate adaptable food because of their general lack of flavor and simple ingredients. Chinese immigration brought Chinese food all across Asia, and noodles above all else were able stick unlike any other Chinese food. The new forms they have taken on outside of China are reflective of how noodles have managed to adapt in the face of different cuisines, cultures, and external forces.



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## Noodles as a Reflection of a Nation

The adaptable nature of noodles not only makes it possible for the dish to conform to a cuisine, but also act as a mirror of the culture of the country or region as well. They help to reveal aspects of the country like its reputation and eating culture.

**Japan** – Despite ramen having originally been made for working class Japanese, it is now sold commonly in higher end restaurants in Japan and abroad. This is reflective of the global opinion of Japan.

**China** – Chinese noodles are commonly presented with less glamour, restaurants are selling good, cheap food and not an experience. This presentation of Chinese noodles may be reflective of China's reputation of being poorer country who produces cheap goods.

**Malaysia** – The wide variety of noodle options available in Malaysia, is representative of the multiethnic makeup of Malaysia. On one block you can find Maggi goreng, laksa, and Chinese noodles.

**Thailand** – Thailand's own noodle dish pad Thai, is the ultimate mirror to Thai culture as it is reflective of a powerful, manipulative government who alters the course of the country's cuisine and a country so devoted to food that they are perhaps known best for this one dish.

**India** – The most "Indian" noodle available in India is Maggi, a cheap and easy instant food. With a booming economy driven by a large and hardworking workforce, India is need of an easy eat and Maggi fills that niche.

"Malaysian foods often condense symbolic messages about hybridity in a multicultural society where everyone gets along and eats each other's food."  
- Penny Van Esterik, *Food Culture in Southeast Asia*

## Adoption of Noodles

Adoption of noodles into a cuisine is not an immediate process, it takes time at specialization. This concept is best explained on a continuum ranging from noodles being most integrated into a cuisine, to least integrated into a cuisine. Since noodles were invited in China and have existed there for more than 4,000 years, noodles have become very well integrated into the cuisine—even becoming a staple. India is on the far other end of the spectrum as they have been eaten in India for a comparatively short period of time and are yet to ever be labeled "Indian." Japan, Thailand, and Malaysia can be placed along the continuum between China and India in that order.

