Noodle Odyssey: *East Asia and Beyond* *

HAN Kyung-Koo

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to use Korean ramyeon *to examine some of the major issues in the study of food and culture. In Japan, as in Korea,* ramen *and* ramyeon *not only came to find loyal consumers and occupy significant places in the food culture of both countries, but also began to cross national boundaries to find fans and markets in China and other countries. The Chinese noodle has come home, after a hundred-year-long voyage to and from Japan via Korea. Three points will be made. Firstly, Korean* ramyeon *has become a separate kind of global food, quite different from Japanese* ramen. Ramyeon *in Korea means "instant noodle," while* ramen *in Japan generally refers to noodles sold in* ramen *restaurants as well as instant noodle. Second, Korean* ramyeon *is a class confuser that, instead of delineating and reinforcing class distinctions, seems to confuse and modify them. Third, I propose to introduce the concept of "ramyeonization." This process is found in the increase of new forms of instant food sold in plastic packages, and also involves the dominance of hot and spicy taste in Korean cuisine. Further, ramyeonization involves individualization and fragmentation of meals and the resultant impact on family and society at large.*

Keywords: *ramyeon*, *ramen*, Chinese noodles, food, ramyeonization

---

* This paper is based on the research funded by the Academy of Korean Studies.

HAN Kyung-Koo is Professor at the College of Liberal Studies, Seoul National University. He obtained his Ph.D. in Anthropology from Harvard University in 1991. His publications include *Death of the Father: An Anthropology of the End in Political Authority* (coauthored, 2004) and "The Archaeology of the Ethnically Homogeneous Nation-State and Multiculturalism in Korea" (2007). E-mail: hanthro@snu.ac.kr.

Noodles Coming Home

This paper started as an ambitious attempt to use Japanese *ramen*, Chinese *lamian*, and Korean *ramyeon* to examine some of the major issues in the study of food and culture. Its origin traces back to my proposal to use *ramen*, *ramyeon*, and *lamian* in developing teaching materials for Education for International Understanding at a small workshop held in Sapporo in the summer of 2007, under the auspices of the Asian Cultural Center of Japan.

Korean *ramyeon* began to be produced with Japanese instant *ramen* technology, which was invented by Ando Momofuku to reproduce *sina soba* (Chinese noodles) sold at stalls and restaurants in Japanese cities. This *sina soba*, as the name suggests, came from China, most likely during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, and was further developed and became famous in Sapporo. In Japan, as in Korea, *ramen* and *ramyeon* not only came to find loyal consumers and occupy a significant place in the food cultures of both countries, but also began to cross-national boundaries to find overseas fans and markets. You can find Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants in the streets of Beijing and Taipei, and Korean-style instant *ramyeon* is sold at a much higher prices than in Korea when found in the supermarkets of major Chinese cities. Whether Korean- or Japanese-style *lamian* has come home, and its odyssey, a hundred-year-long voyage home, deserves serious attention and study. However, circumstances beyond my control forced me to limit my discussion to Korean *ramyeon*, providing only a sketch of Japanese *ramen* and an even smaller mention of Chinese *lamian*. I hope to have a chance to study Japanese noodles and Chinese noodles systematically and complete my original plan in the near future.

In this paper, I would like to make the following three points. First, although virtually the same names are used, Korean *ramyeon* has become a different kind of global food, quite different from Japanese *ramen*. I seriously doubt whether we can put Korean *ramyeon* and Japanese-style *ramen* in the same category. *Ramyeon* in Korea means "instant noodles," while *ramen* in Japan are noodles sold at *ramen*

restaurants, unless specifically labeled "instant *ramen*."

Second, Korean *ramyeon* is a class confuser. Sociological and anthropological studies of food (Appadurai 1986, 1996; Beadsworth and Keil 1997; McCracken 1990) have been fascinated with the ways food is used to assign distinction. Regional differences, as well as differences in social class, gender, and ethnicity have been shown to be produced and reproduced by food. However, *ramyeon* seems to play the role of confusing and modifying class distinctions instead of delineating and reinforcing them. It seems that *ramyeon* sometimes integrates class differences.

Third, I would like to play on the concept of McDonaldization and introduce a new word "ramyeonization" to describe the social and cultural practices associated with the production, distribution, serving, and consumption of *ramyeon*, and its implications for society at large. Ramyeonization can be considered at least in three different fields: the increase of new forms of food sold in plastic packages that can be prepared and served almost instantly by boiling or adding boiling water and waiting a few minutes; the increasingly dominant taste of hot and spicy *ramyeon* soup in Korean cuisine[1]; and the individualization and fragmentation of meals and the resulting impact on family and society at large.

From *Ramen* to *Ramyeon*

Making of Ramen *in Japan*

Japanese *ramen* first appeared as *sina soba* (Chinese noodles) after the war with China from 1894 to 1895, before its name was changed into the more or less politically correct *chuka soba*.[2] Local variations

1. For a discussion on the "hot and spicy" in Korea, see Han (2000).
2. The early history of ramen in Japan is not clear, but Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum exhibited an alleged replica of the first ramen dish ever eaten by a Japanese citizen, Tokugawa Mitsukuni (better known as Mito Komon), who was ruler of Mito Domain in the seventeenth century. The first newspaper ad for Chinese noo-

began to develop, and with enthusiastic coverage on the part of mass media, *ramen* restaurants, as well as *ramen manga* and websites, are now significant players in Japan's tourist industry.

In postwar Japan which suffered from severe food shortages, Chinese noodles or *ramen* began to attract people's attention. Okumura Ayao (2001) says that the popularity of *ramen* in the mid-1950s was part of the "swing from lean to fat" in the Japanese diet. Compared to "light" traditional Japanese soups, which used dried seafood such as *kombu* (dried kelp), *katsuobushi* (dried bonito), or *niboshi* (dried small sardines) as the base, *ramen* indeed seemed to be more fatty and nutritious. It is likely that *ramyeon*'s greasy soup was not as new to Koreans as it was to the Japanese. For many poor Koreans who could not afford beef-based soup, the taste of *ramyeon* soup, although largely artificial, was probably more than welcome. Japanese *ramen* is made with fresh noodles, while Korean *ramyeon* producers fry the noodle in either beef or vegetable suet. Many Japanese restaurants take great pride in making their own noodles, while no Korean *ramyeon* restaurants dream of making noodles of their own.

It is said that the instant *ramen* invented in 1958 by Nissin Foods was initially rejected by Japan's food industry as "a novelty with no future." Japanese-style *ramen* is not only popular around the world, but according to a report of BBC in 2000,[3] many Japanese believe instant noodles to be their country's most important invention of the twentieth century. Instant *ramen* earned higher marks than karaoke, Walkman personal stereos, computer games, and small cameras. Announcing the results of a survey of what the Japanese see as their best exports, Fuji Research Institute declared, "Instant noodles, representing 'Made in Japan,' are now not only just a national food but a global food." *Ramen* is now considered a proper Japanese dish that has gone through the process of adaptive evolution of more than a

---

dles (called "Nanking soba") appeared in 1884. In 1906, *ramen* or "*sina soba*" became popular, and in 1910 the first regular ramen shop (Rairai-ken) opened in Asakusa, Tokyo.

3. "Japan Votes Noodle the Tops," http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1067506.stm (accessed December 12, 2000).

hundred years in Japan.

Making of Korean-Style Ramyeon

Jeon Jung-yung was the first to produce *ramyeon* in Korea. According to the official history of Samyang Ramyeon Co., he started as an insurance man and who occasionally had to visit Japan and Southeast Asia on business trips. He was deeply impressed with Japanese *ramen*, which began industrial production in 1958. One of the official reasons for the production of *ramyeon* in Korea was to deal with the shortage of food, especially of rice. *Ramyeon* was introduced in Korea to become the "second rice."

Samyang produced its first *ramyeon* in September 1963, with the help of Myosei Food in Japan. It was a great success, and soon others began to manufacture *ramyeon*. Samyang was the industry leader, enjoying 40 percent of the market share as consumption of *ramyeon* continued to increase during the 1980s. Samyang used second-rate beef tallow in producing its *ramyeon* soup powder and in frying the *ramyeon* noodles, and advertised that its *ramyeon* was made of beef, something fantastic to the ears of poor Koreans who could not afford to buy real beef. Since traditional Korean cuisine has long used beef and pork, there was no need for "a swing from lean to fat" (see below) as in Japan, whose citizens seldom ate beef and pork until the Meiji period. It was only because of poverty that Koreans could not eat beef, and *ramyeon* claimed to offer the chance to enjoy it at an affordable price. Visible bits of rendered beef fat floated in *ramyeon*, which could be served inexpensively and conveniently.

Samyang was doing well, but suffered a big setback in November 1989 when it was accused of using industrial tallow for its *ramyeon*. When the press reported this, the public was indignant. The concern and fear over the potential harm *ramyeon* may have had on their health seemed to have been justified.[4] Such worries had been an open

4. For a discussion of Koreans' sensitivity toward health and food safety issues, see Han (forthcoming).

secret ever since the consumption of the first *ramyeon* in Korea. The whole incident started with an anonymous report that *ramyeon* makers were using industrial suet for soap or lubricating oil. More than ten businessmen were arrested and boycott campaigns were organized. Samyang Ramyeon had to remove several million dollars' worth of its products from the market and close its factories for three months. Although Samyang's name was cleared by a belated "not guilty" decision of the Supreme Court in August 1997, seven years and eight months after the first accusation, it still has not recovered its market share. Now Nongshim enjoys more than 60 percent share of the market.

There has been widespread public concern for food safety and health ever since the introduction of *ramyeon* in Korea, although *ramyeon* producers have emphasized the nutritional value and taste of beef. Criticisms have been raised against *ramyeon* for the nutritional imbalance it can cause when eaten too often and in too great a quantity. *Ramyeon* has also been targeted for its high sodium content and the poor quality of palm oil or beef suet used in frying the noodles, as well as the excessive use of artificial flavoring or MSG (monosodium glutamate), and hot peppers. In fact, many nutritional scholars and opinion leaders have warned that a diet too dependent on *ramyeon* may lead to malnutrition. The cheap price of *ramyeon* seemed to underscore complaints that producers were using cheap, poor-quality materials. Also important is the criticism that *ramyeon* is not environmentally friendly; many *ramyeon* producers use palm oil, as well as receptacles and packages made of synthetic materials that may cause endocrine disruption. *Ramyeon* has also been held responsible for swollen faces, pimples, rashes, and obesity because of the use of trans fat and other additives. Actually, the secrets that would keep your face from swelling in the morning even after having eaten *ramyeon* during the night are widespread on the internet.[5]

5. The secret is rather simple: Add milk to the *ramyeon* as it cooks, or don't drink any water during the night! Please refer to: http://cafe.daum.net/ramyunheaven, http://blog.naver.com/sphere4u?Redirect = Log&logNo = 50073389556; http://cafe.naver.com/18886.cafe?iframe_url = /ArticleRead.nhn%3Farticleid = 1728.

Because of its cheap price and beginnings as a rice substitute, *ramyeon* was considered food for those who were too poor to buy rice, unable to cook properly, or those who happened to have too little time to prepare and enjoy regular meals. The Korean government's efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to promote the consumption of wheat flour, which the United States gave as aid, played a significant role in giving *ramyeon* an association with poverty and expediency.

It is not difficult to find stories of overcoming poverty and hardship that mention *ramyeon*. In a children's book titled *Huimang ramyeon sebongji* (Three Ramyeon Bags of Hope), two children from a poor family wanted to eat *ramyeon* and tried to coax their mother into buying some, but their mother was too poor. This desperate situation was solved by the appearance of another small girl living next door who happened to hear the lamentation. She brought three bags of *ramyeon* for her poor neighbors, and her kindness gave the poor children hope for the future.

It would be unthinkable for Koreans to eat *ramyeon* on birthday, although noodles are a traditional part of celebrations, since they symbolically represent wishes for a long life. In fact, at the workshop I mentioned above, both Koreans and Japanese were shocked to hear that their Chinese colleagues eat *lamian* on birthdays. For Koreans, eating a surrogate dish of inferior quality and expediency, such as *ramyeon*, is one of the saddest things that can happen on birthday.[6]

The symbolic and practical significance of *ramyeon* for the poor makes *ramyeon* one of the important indices of consumer prices in Korea. The government has made efforts to keep the price of *ramyeon* as low as possible in order to give the impression that inflation was under control. It was because of the image of *ramyeon* as food for the poor that the Lee Myung-bak government included *ramyeon* in its anachronistic plan to control the prices of 52 necessities, including

6. Dr. Park Dong-Sung, discussing a draft of this paper at a conference, pointed out that this "shock" on the part of Koreans and Japanese might be due to the sacredness they find in rice. Many Chinese do not eat rice as their staple food, and thus find no problem in eating something other than rice on birthday.

gasoline, *soju* (a cheap alcoholic beverage), and cram school tuition in March 2008.[7]

As instant *ramyeon* is so cheap and convenient to serve, it also has the image of being an emergency food. Whenever there is an emergency situation, such as a natural disaster, huge quantities of *ramyeon* are sent as relief goods. That explains why panicked Koreans purchased *ramyeon* when North Korea announced its withdrawal from the Nonproliferation Treaty in March 1993.

Japanese-Style "Fresh" Ramen *versus Korean-Style "Fried"* Ramyeon

In Japan, *ramen* can refer to both the noodles sold in restaurants and instant noodles sold in supermarkets, but it is possible that most Japanese associate it with the former. In contrast to Korea, where *ramyeon* is synonymous with the instant *ramyeon* sold in cups or plastic bags at supermarkets and is often regarded as insufficient to constitute a complete meal in itself, in Japan, *ramen* is considered a complete meal by itself and is sometimes consumed with *gyoza* (fried dumpling). In Korea, *ramyeon* sometimes can be eaten in place of a meal in times of necessary, but many people finish the noodles first

7. According to the report by *Korea Times* staff reporter Yoon Ja-young, "Prices of *ramyeon*, gasoline, *soju*, and cram school tuition will be monitored and controlled by the government. . . . The ministry said it has picked 52 daily necessities whose prices will be monitored and controlled to stabilize the livelihood of the working class amid global inflation pressures. The measure comes after President Lee Myung-bak's remarks that the prices of daily necessities should be controlled. . . . The government said the selection was based on an analysis of shopping and spending habits of households making an average of 2.47 million won or less each month. They often buy such items, spending a considerable portion of their income on them. Consumer groups also gave advice in selecting the items. It first chose 26 items that had increased in price by over 5 percent over the last year. Included in the list are wheat, *ramyeon*, Korean cabbage, radish, tofu, garlic, red pepper paste, vegetable oil, eggs, apples, snacks, detergent, gasoline, subway and bus fares, cram school tuition, shampoo, and daycare center fees, among others. . . . The National Statistical Office will monitor price changes of these 52 items every 10 days, and they will be released with consumer prices statistics every month, the ministry said ("Prices of 52 Daily Necessities Under Control," *Korea Times*, March 25, 2008).

and then eat the soup with steamed rice or *gimbap* (rice rolled in a sheet of dried seaweed and stuffed with other ingredients, such as meat or vegetables). This interesting difference between *ramen* and *ramyeon* is corroborated by the assertion on a *ramen* site that says, "There is no reason for confusion. 'Cooking *ramen* is easy. Unbelievable!'"[8] The site declares that it takes at least several hours to prepare *ramen*. It proudly adds that it takes a day or more for some shops to prepare just the broth. *Ramen* seems to have joined or been adopted into the so-called tradition of authentic Japanese cuisine. It is easy to find in many Japanese sites asserting that *ramen* is not an instant food.

Japanese-style *ramen* succeeded in securing its place in Japanese cuisine as a low-cost but still respectable dish with many local varieties. A vast number of cities and provinces now claim their own variety of *ramen* and the search for and development of new tastes in *ramen* is taken for granted. On the other hand, Korean-style *ramyeon* started as instant *ramyeon* and has remained so. Several different food companies began to produce *saeng ramyeon* (unfried *ramyeon*), but it is the instant *ramyeon* that is the dominant form produced, purchased, and consumed in Korea.

There are very few Korean-style restaurants in Korea that specialize in *ramyeon*. Together with *ramyeon*, they usually sell other simple dishes or snacks for students and office workers who want quick meals or need to eat between meals. Those Korean chefs at these shops have little room for improvement in taste since they have to work with instant *ramyeon*, which they have to serve at a much

8. The site says: "Since the word 'Ramen' reminds you of instant noodles, many seems to have mistakenly thought that cooking 'Real' ramen is easy as well. This is a complete misunderstanding. It takes at least several hours. Some shops take a day or longer to prepare just the broth. Moreover, the temperature, moisture levels, and conditions of ingredients will affect the taste and flavor, so close and unremitting attention is required to keep each serving reliable in taste. It is said that it requires years-long practical training to become a master ramen chef" (http://freeforumzone.leonardo.it/discussione.aspx?idd=3679049, accessed October 2009).

lower price than their Japanese counterparts can. Surprisingly, even so, some restaurant chefs continue to invent new ways of serving *ramyeon*.

Many chefs and devotees of Korean-style *ramyeon* are proud of their personal secrets for working with industrially produced *ramyeon*, but all of them use noodle and soup powder produced industrially by one of the food companies in Korea. This narrows their concentration to their cooking methods. One way to make a real difference is to add a variety of ingredients such as egg, kimchi, rice cakes, fish cakes, and other foodstuffs. Rarely are beef, pork, fish, or chicken used, probably because these are too expensive for such a cheap dish.[9]

Japanese *ramyeon* has to be understood in the system of Japanese cuisine, while Korean *ramyeon* should be understood in the system of Korean cuisine. Japanese *ramen* appeared in a society where the tradition of *udon* (thick wheat-flour noodle) and *soba* (thin buckwheat-flour noodle) was already in existence. *Soba* could be described as the traditional fast food of the Edo period. One of the reasons why *ramen* became rapidly popular in postwar Japan was that it could provide a very rich soup for a cheap price.

In Japan, it was only after *ramen* became popular that instant *ramen* was invented. Instant *ramen* was, from the beginning, a substitute for the *ramen* sold at restaurants. When Momofuku Ando invented the instant noodle, his intent was to make it easy for people to reproduce the *ramen* served at street stalls and specialized restaurants. *Ramen* in Japan began to attract attention as a new item in domestic tourism. It has become quite common to watch TV programs devoted to visiting local cities to introduce the special variety *ramen* of that particular place. In addition to TV programs and magazine articles, *manga* also shows the efforts of a *ramen* chef to improve the taste of *ramen* in the same style of the traditional artisans, expending a tremendous amount of energy. However, in Korea,

9. There was a report that pork cutlet *ramyeon* appeared recently in Korea, signifying an interesting change in Korean *ramyeon* making.

when instant *ramyeon* was introduced, it did not have a long tradition of urban noodle restaurants. Although noodles were expensive in Korea in the past, traditional Korean cities did not experience the urbanization and commercialization that provided the socioeconomic environment for specialized noodle shops to develop.

The nearest equivalent to Japanese *ramen* may be *kalguksu* (knife noodle, or noodles cut with a kitchen knife) or *jajangmyeon* (noodles with black bean paste sauce). There are some famous *kalguksu* and *jajangmyeon* specialty restaurants that take pride in their unique taste and secret recipes, many of which make their own noodles "in house." Like Japanese *ramen*, *kalguksu* and *jajangmyeon* can be consumed as a proper meal or as a snack.

One of the reasons why *ramyeon* has not attracted the same level

Japanese *Ramen*	**Korean *Ramyeon***
Ramen sold at specialized restaurants and instant ramen in plastic packages	Instant *ramyeon* in plastic packages sold at supermarkets
"Fresh" noodles and soup, often made at the restaurants	Noodle and soup industrially produced (noodle fried in oil or fat)
Chefs' efforts make a difference: Cooking ramen is not easy!!!	Cooking *ramyeon* should be easy! Inconvenient *ramyeon* is no longer *ramyeon.*
Great variety in tastes and materials	Dominance of the hot and spicy flavors
A meal complete in itself, though often eaten with *gyoza* (dumplings)	Not a complete meal in and of itself, frequently supplemented with a bowl of rice. Often eaten as snack.
Existence of urban noodle restaurant traditions (*udon* and *soba*), which could become models for *ramen* restaurants. *Ramen* became popular in street stalls and restaurants, followed by the invention of instant *ramen*.	*Ramyeon* was introduced into Korea in the form of instant noodles. No independent *ramyeon* restaurant tradition exists.

of attention or effort in Korea as in Japan until recently is perhaps the low price of *ramyeon*, or rather Koreans' general perception of *ramyeon* as cheap food. Another reason might be the "less than full" meal status *ramyeon* occupies, stemming from its great convenience in preparation and serving. In the past, *ramyeon* has meant instant *ramyeon*, so *ramyeon* was identified as a cheap and handy substitute for a proper meal, not a full one. However, being cheap and convenient does not mean that there have not been efforts at developing various tips and tricks for making good *ramyeon* or improving *ramyeon*'s taste, only that such tips and tricks have not developed into a commercially rewarding pursuit. It is ironic that *ramyeon* does not enjoy a prestigious position in the hierarchy of Korean food despite the fact that many Koreans seem addicted to *ramyeon*.

Spiciness in Korean-Style Ramyeon*: A Blessing and a Curse*

Although instant *ramen* was first invented in Japan, Koreans consume and sell more instant *ramyeon* now. According to a report of the *Korea Times*,[10] Nongshim Ramyeon Co. exported 161 billion won worth of its spicy instant *ramyeon* to more than 70 countries, including China, Japan, and the United States. The most famous of the spicy instant noodles is Shin Ramyeon (produced by Nongshim Ramyeon Co.), which rose in 1986 to become the number-one seller in the Korean market despite being glutted with more than 150 different styles of instant noodle products. Shin Ramyeon has a unique spicy taste that Nongshim company's officials claim to have developed through several years of research efforts in their lab.

Of course, there are different kinds of *ramyeon* in Korea, including some that are not spicy. However, spiciness seems to have become the quality that differentiates Korean *ramyeon*. In 2008, Shin Ramyeon (literally, "spicy-hot *ramyeon*") singlehandedly took a 23 percent share of a market in which some 160 different kinds of

10. Jane Han, "Lotte Gum No. 1-Selling Product Overseas," *Korea Times*, April 19, 2009.

instant noodles are sold. Some netizens argue that Shin Ramyeon purchased in Korea actually tastes better than Shin Ramen purchased in Japan.

Some criticize that spiciness dominates and obscures other tastes so that one does not really know the flavor of what he or she is eating, while others say that it is the spiciness that attracts consumers, who are almost addicted to the hot taste. I will discuss this addiction later in detail.

Japanese Ramen *in Seoul*

In recent years, Japanese-style *ramen* shops have appeared in Seoul, Hong Kong, and Beijing, while Korean instant *ramyeon*, famous for its spicy taste, is very popular not only throughout East Asia, but also in Russia and Europe. Although the number of Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants is on the rise, it does not seem that they will ever pose a significant threat to Korean-style *ramyeon*. Many Korean students who have visited Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants said that they found the taste greasy, dull, and not spicy, while the price was rather expensive. Most of the guests who visit these Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants are young men and women. At the many Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants in Seoul, *ramen* is neither fast nor cheap.

Japanese-style restaurants in Seoul are different from their Tokyo counterparts. Many guests in Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants in Seoul do not immediately leave after finishing their bowls of *ramen*, but continue to occupy the seats and talk just as they would if they were in other restaurants. Many Japanese-style *ramen* restaurants also sell "Japaneseness" by decorating the walls with Japanese pictures, posters, and dolls. In some places they greet the customers in Japanese and/or repeat the contents of the order in Japanese. Some restaurants seem to try to teach "*ramen* culture" to their customers by placing information sheets that explain how to best enjoy *ramen*.

Approximately ten years ago, an attempt to introduce Japanese *gyudon* (a bowl of boiled rice topped with beef) in Korea failed. Yoshinoya Gyudon shops were strategically placed in Gangnam and

Sinchon, which bustled with young people, but the attempt failed miserably. It was relatively expensive, but not very chic. The taste was a little too sweet. It is potentially very difficult for boutique *ramyeon* (Japanese-style or Korean-style) to enjoy major success in Korea. It is not because it is difficult to develop unique and tasty *ramyeon*, but because many Koreans love *ramyeon* for its convenience and price. For Koreans, *ramyeon* is, on balance, tasty enough for its price and convenience. It isn't reasonable in the minds of most people to sacrifice price and convenience, the greatest attractive points of *ramyeon*, for what they consider to be a meager improvement in taste.

What is more important is that many Koreans, as well as foreigners who have become lovers of Korean-style *ramyeon*, find it delicious precisely because of its hot and spicy taste. One Korean, who was asked whether he has ever tried to make *ramyeon* using the "fresh *ramyeon* noodles" produced by Pulmuwon, smiled and answered that it would deprive one of all the merits of *ramyeon*. You eat *ramyeon* precisely because it is so convenient. If you can bother to buy fresh *ramyeon* noodles and prepare the soup and everything, why would you eat *ramyeon*? You'd be better off cooking other dishes.

For some Koreans, there is a strong possibility of cognitive dissonance and emotional resistance if they have to put so much energy, time, and money into boiling a bowl of *ramyeon*, a dish that has always been cheap, fast, effortless, and bearably tasty. In other words, for many Koreans, expensive, time-consuming, serious *ramyeon* is a contradiction. Koreans are, in a sense, "addicted" to the taste of *ramyeon*. Many Koreans may enjoy Japanese-style *ramen* for a change, but it is unthinkable that they would forget the familiarity they developed with the taste of Korean *ramyeon* soup. The cheap Korean-style *ramyeon* continues to enjoy popularity in the face of the extremely rich, refined *ramen* made at boutique restaurants. It may well be impossible for Japanese-style *ramen* to dominate the Korean market, in spite of its short-term success.

Ramyeon Is NOT Good to Think?: Distinction and Beyond

Sociologists and anthropologists have been fascinated with the ways in which people use food to distinguish themselves from one another.[11] Preparation and consumption of food is used to produce and reproduce regional differences, as well as differences in social class, gender, and ethnicity. However, *ramyeon* seems to play a role in confusing and modifying class distinctions instead of delineating and reinforcing them. It seems that *ramyeon* sometimes integrates class differences.

Ramyeon is usually associated with poverty and expediency now, but the noodle enjoys prestige in the traditional food system, with a history of more than a thousand years in Korea. Early records show that Koreans enjoyed noodles in the Goryeo period (918-1392), but they were rare and expensive at that time since wheat was not widely cultivated. One Chinese observer said that the Goryeo people cherish noodles, as wheat flour had to be imported from China and was very expensive. Buckwheat flour was much easier to produce and popular, as well. However, both wheat-flour noodles and buckwheat-flour noodles were special dishes served on birthdays and weddings because of their length symbolically meaning long life.[12] People wanted their lives and marriage bonds to be as long as the noodles. When noodles are put in a bowl to be offered at ancestral rituals, special care is given to prevent the noodle from being cut into smaller segments.

Ramyeon, although technically a noodle, does not share the traditional prestige and symbolic meanings associated with other noodles. It is sometimes associated with poverty and is not considered to constitute a proper meal in itself. *Ramyeon* was something you had when you were too poor to have a proper meal of steamed rice.[13]

11. See Appadurai (1986, 1996), Beadsworth and Keil (1997), and McCracken (1990).
12. This comes from a story of a birthday party for an ancient Chinese emperor.
13. Reading the draft of this paper, Dr. Park and several others pointed out that it might not be universally correct to say that the price of *ramyeon* was cheap. *Ramyeon* was cheap in the eyes of middle-class Seoulites, but not to most poor

The price of rice has fallen, but the image of *ramyeon* as poor men's food has not vanished. Sometimes, it is not simply the price but the lack of cooking time or facilities needed to prepare it that continues to suppress the image of *ramyeon*.

Instant *ramyeon* has also been consumed as-is by kids, just as if it were a confection or a snack. Kids tear open the plastic package, break up the dried *ramyeon* noodles into smaller chunks, pour the *ramyeon* soup powder over the broken chunks of *ramyeon* noodles, and enjoy. Taking notice of this practice, one food company developed and sold a special snack product called "Ppusyeo Ppusyeo," imitating this very practice.[14] Some call this practice "eating *ramyeon* fresh." This is one way of enjoying *ramyeon* that the Japanese have not incorporated.

During their years of schooling and military service, many Koreans eat a huge amount of *ramyeon* and develop strange ways of serving it. As so many people developed an addiction to *ramyeon* as children, students, and soldiers, *ramyeon* plays a role in modifying class distinctions, instead of delineating and reinforcing as food usually does. This class bonding role in *ramyeon* consumption is very interesting.

In sum, almost all Koreans have been exposed to instant *ramyeon* since early childhood, and many of them have become addicted to its taste. Whatever the class background, Koreans have had plenty of opportunities to eat it during childhood: before or after cram school and private lessons; for lunch or snack; and during field activities and military service. They have many chances to eat *ramyeon* once they are employed, too. As such, Koreans from all different socioeconomic backgrounds have eaten the same instant *ramyeon*, which

---

peasant families. Many families found the price of *ramyeon* rather expensive, and some families would buy several bags of *ramyeon* and increase the quantity they could serve by adding cheaper ordinary noodles (*guksu*).

14. Ppusyeo Ppusyeo (literally, "break-break") produced by Ottugi Food Co. has a *ramyeon*-noodle shape and a bag of soup mix, and is available in six different flavors.

leaves little room for assigning class distinctions. Many men and women of wealth, power, and high social status in Korea are presumed to be addicts of *ramyeon* who grew up eating it in many different ways. Of course, there are some that have not acquired the habit, and a man of some influence can engage himself in politics of food by showing off his love for *ramyeon* or consuming it in the company of his lesser friends. At the same time, those who don't eat *ramyeon* might be scoffed at as too highly born.

A legendary tale illustrates this point. When the infamous Korean Air flight took off from Rangoon after the North Korean bomb attack intended to assassinate the Korean president and his entourage on October 9, 1983, it was in such a hurry that it did not have time to load any meals on board. During the long flight to Seoul, the stewardess served instant *ramyeon*, which they happened to have on board. It was another classic case of *ramyeon* being served as food of emergency and expediency.

According to urban legend, one young *jaebeol* (conglomerate) president who succeeded his father, the founder president, refused to eat *ramyeon* because it was a low-class food. On seeing this, supposedly Mr. Jeong Ju-yeong, the founder and then president of Hyundai Group, took his neighbor's bowl and ate two servings with gusto. This idle gossip was usually repeated by white-collar workers and told with a certain fondness for old Mr. Jeong, who relished *ramyeon* because he started out in life very poor. Those who could not eat *ramyeon* (such as the young president) were often spoken of as having been brought up in a different world entirely. When the story is told, there is a sense of mild criticism for a leader so removed from mainstream Korean society because of his rich father, and thus not really qualified to lead.

Admirals and generals, as well as captains and colonels have enjoyed sharing bowls of *ramyeon* with sailors and soldiers whenever they have the chance. Sharing the cheapest and most common food is one way of building solidarity in many hierarchical organizations. A community of *ramyeon* can be briefly created and experienced in this way. When President Kim Young-sam was inaugurated in Febru-

ary 1993, he began to practice "*kalguksu* politics." Instead of serving regular meals to the visitors to the Blue House, he had his cook serve his favorite noodle, indicative of his authentic "common folk" quality, an important trait of a truly democratic leader.

A Ramyeonizing Society?

Now I would like to play on the concept of McDonaldization and introduce a new word "ramyeonization" to emphasize the social and cultural practices associated with the production, distribution, serving, and consumption of *ramyeon*, and the implications for society at large. Ramyeonization can be considered at least in three different fields: the increase of new forms of food sold in plastic packages that can be served instantly by boiling or adding boiling water; the increasingly dominant taste of hot and spicy *ramyeon* soup in Korean cuisine; and the individualization and fragmentation of meals and the resultant impact on family and society at large.

While the McDonaldization thesis (Ritzer 2004) is composed of four key concepts such as increase of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control in society in general, ramyeonization is composed of three key concepts: increase in industrially produced instant food products, fragmentation of meals and family, and dominance of hot and spicy flavors.

Ramyeonization of Food in Korea: Increase of Ramyeon*-Style Food*

McDonaldization is focused on the increase of fast food and the sociocultural changes associated with it. I would like to focus on the increase of instant food and its sociocultural implications. Fast food is called fast because it can be ordered and received in a very short amount of time. Fast food can be eaten at the restaurant, but it can be taken out or delivered to the home or office. Instant food is even faster than fast food. The consumer does not have to travel to the fast food restaurant. Instead, it only requires the individual to retrieve it

from the cupboard or refrigerator, remove the package, add boiling water, or put in the microwave oven. Instant food is purchased at the supermarket and prepared at home, at the office, or in the field without bothering to visit or call fast food restaurants. Moreover, it gives the consumer some control in terms of preparation, including the addition of flavors or ingredients, as well as control over preparation time. As simple as the process is, it does allow for a certain degree of creativity on the part of the consumer. Consumption of industrially produced food at home is rapidly increasing. There is a significant increase in food products that can be prepared "instantly" at home.

Ramyeonization of food can lead to interesting jokes. Students who frequent convenience stores instead of fast food restaurants for instant food invented so-called Seven-Eleven *jeongsik* (table d'hôte), which consists of a "cup *ramyeon*" as an appetizer, *gochu bulgogi gimbap* (triangular rice ball with hot and spicy pork in the center, wrapped with dried seaweed) as entrée, a canned coffee, and a cup of fruit jelly as a dessert.

The slow food movement started in response to the rise of fast food, and celebrates cooking at home. However, we are now witnessing the rapid transformation of "cooking at home." Even though prepared and served at home, much of the cooking process is skipped because of industrial processing. Furthermore, as less and less is done at home, the promotion strategy of food producers tends to emphasize the home-like qualities of their products. Commercials emphasize such qualities as "just like homemade," "motherly love," "use of authentic, traditional methods," etc. At the same time, health, well-being, omission of MSG and food additives, and use of organic or natural ingredients have risen as new catchphrases.

Selling "mother" (Hochschild 2003), "nostalgia" (Boym 2001; Creighton 1997; Stewart 1988), "authenticity" (Bendix 1997), "tradition" (Ivy 1995), and terms like health, well-being, and nature seems to be the secret to marketing industrially produced food products in a world where one can find many different dishes that are not fundamentally different in taste. As tastes are standardized, we may be losing the ability to distinguish fine differences.

Ramyeonization in Taste: Dominance of Hot and Spicy Flavor

So many Koreans share memories from their youthful days when they used the contents of the soup bag they found in the *ramyeon* package to improve the taste of food they prepared during camping, mountain climbing, hiking, or any other such occasions when they had to prepare their own meals.

The hot and spicy flavor of industrially produced Korean *ramyeon* soup seems to be the most common denominator in making the taste a favorite for those around for meal preparation. Using the *ramyeon* soup for improving the taste of any soup-based dish has been an open secret among Boy Scouts, mountain climbing societies, and other outdoor adventure-seekers. It is no wonder that so many Koreans burst into laughter watching a pop singer use *ramyeon* soup as his secret to improve the taste of many different dishes he and his colleagues were expected to make on a popular TV program titled "The Family Is Out." After his addition of *ramyeon* soup powder, everybody said that the taste actually improved.

As mentioned earlier, *ramyeon* is generally considered to be a very low-class dish in Korea. It is very spicy, and notorious for profuse use of artificial seasoning. However, Koreans are accustomed—even addicted—to the taste. It can be compared to the great popularity of a certain food company's "banana milk," which has no natural banana in it. This artificial flavor and taste seem to be the correct banana taste and flavor to the extent that "banana milk" from other companies with real banana as an ingredient do not do well in the market. As the saying goes, there's no accounting for taste. Authenticity does not seem to help when one is already addicted to a certain flavor profile.

We can also see that the consumption of instant coffee has not decreased, even though other forms of coffee have become very popular as Starbucks and Coffee Bean coffee shops have begun to appear in Korea. Many Koreans who learned to enjoy the flavor and taste of regular coffee do not discard their love for instant coffee. Many Koreans continue to ask for "*japangi* (automatic vending machine)-style

coffee" or "*dabang* (coffee shop)-style coffee." This means that Koreans might learn to like Japanese-style *ramen* with its exquisite taste and flavors achieved through elaborate preparation as well, but continue to indulge themselves in the pungent taste of cheap *ramyeon*. As many Koreans do not seriously compare drip coffee and instant coffee, so they may not compare Japanese-style *ramen* and Korean-style *ramyeon*.

Fragmentation of Meal, Fragmentation of Family

Ramyeon can be used in creating a sense of community, but it is quite often consumed alone and in a hurry, transforming the traditional idea of family who eats from the same pot. Because of its convenience, *ramyeon* renders meal time meaningless. It can be eaten at any time, in any place, with or without company. In this way, *ramyeon* blurs the distinction between meals and snacks, between those who share meals and those who do not.

One of the most unique experiences of modern men and women may well be eating alone. Sharing food and communal dining have been regarded as normal ever since the appearance of hunting and gathering as a mode of subsistence. Eating alone was considered extraordinary: it was a mark of unhappiness, loneliness, being cast out, punishment, eccentricity, misanthropy, or worse. However, modern children often, out of necessity, learn to eat alone. Family members often have difficulty in finding time to sit together at the dining table. Not eating together is made easier by *ramyeon* and other instant foods; now, one begins to wonder whether fragmentation is not so much the cause as the result of the rise of *ramyeon* and instant food.

Conclusion

When I began the study for this paper, I expected *lamian*, *ramen*, and *ramyeon* to provide a mirror for East Asians to reflect on the

issues of food culture. One of the goals of this paper was to compare and contrast Japanese *ramen*, Korean *ramyeon*, and Chinese *lamian*, and to use the insight and knowledge from this to understand East Asia and its foodways. I wanted to understand the relative importance and place of *lamian*, *ramen*, and *ramyeon* in the food culture of each nation. However, it has become clear that we have to be extremely careful in any such comparative study. While *ramen* in Japan includes both "boutique" *ramen* and instant *ramen* sold at supermarkets, *ramyeon* in Korea usually means instant food. If we think about the semantic domain of *lamian* in China, the picture becomes even more complicated.

At the same time, one embarrassing problem is raised by this study. It is the predicament faced by the Korean government in promoting globalization of Korean food. The Korean government is positioning Korean food as "slow food," "made using traditional methods," with "natural flavors and tastes." In other words, it is the food of the future, with a healthy and refined taste. However, modern Koreans seem addicted to the cheap and unrefined taste of instant *ramyeon* soup. I propose that modern Koreans have become rather insensitive to understanding the fine differences in taste because of the extremely hot and spicy food to which they have grown accustomed. *Ramyeon* in Korea seems to be one of those dirty little secrets that might be called cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997).

Further study on Chinese *lamian*, as well as the consumption of Japanese *ramen* and Korean *ramyeon* in China, is needed to complete this odyssey of the noodle. We have seen that the rise of *ramen* in Japan and *ramyeon* in Korea would never have happened without war, modernization, U.S. aid, rice shortages, rapid economic growth and the subsequent increase of female workers, internationalization, concerns for health and food safety as well as environmental conservation, traditional food culture, nostalgia business, and other related matters. Also noteworthy is the new trend in the consumption of *ramyeon* in Korea, with significant efforts made not only to make *ramyeon* "chic" and high class, but also to cultivate niche markets.

In short, *lamian*, *ramen*, and *ramyeon* provide the mirror for

East Asians to reflect not only on the issues of food culture but also on the modern history of each nation-state and of the region as a whole.

REFERENCES

Anon. 2009. "Life Surrounded by Ramen." http://www.worldramen.net/ABC/Life Surround/LifeFlame.html (accessed October 1).

Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Beadsworth, Alan, and Teresa Keil. 1997. *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society*. London and New York: Routledge.

Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies.* Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Boym, Svetlana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia.* New York: Basic Books.

Creighton, Millie. 1997. "Consuming Rural Japan: The Marketing of Tradition and Nostalgia in the Japanese Travel Industry." *Ethnology* 36.3 (summer): 239-254.

Han, Kyung-Koo. 2000. "Some Foods Are Good to Think: Kimchi and the Epitomization of National Character." *Korea Social Science Journal* 27.1.

_____. Forthcoming. "The Kimchi 'Wars' in Globalizing East Asia: Consuming Class, Gender, Health, and National Identity." In *Consuming Korean Culture in Early and Late Modernity*, edited by L. Kendall. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State.* New York and London: Routledge.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2003. *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: The University of California Press.

Ivy, Marilyn. 1995. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kube, Rokuro. 1999/2009. *Ramen hakkenden* (The Ramen King). Tokyo: Shogakkan.

McCracken, Grant. 1990. *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the*

Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
Miller, Daniel. 1995. "Consumption and Commodities." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 141-161.
Ritzer, George. 2004. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Rev. ed. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Pine Forge Press.
Stewart, Kathleen. 1988. "Nostalgia: A Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology* 3.3: 227.

GLOSSARY

chuka soba (J.)	中華蕎麥	*kalguksu*	칼국수
dabang	茶房	*katsuobushi* (J.)	鰹節
gimbap	김밥	*kombu* (J.)	昆布
gochu bulgogi gimbap	고추불고기 김밥	*manga* (J.)	漫画
guksu	국수	*niboshi* (J.)	煮干
gyoza (J.)	餃子	Ppusyeo Ppusyeo	뿌셔뿌셔
gyudon (J.)	牛丼	*ramen* (J.)	拉麵
Huimang ramyeon sebongji	희망 라면 세봉지	*ramyeon*	라면
jajangmyeon	자장면	*saeng ramyeon*	생라면
japangi	自販機	*sina soba* (J.)	支那蕎麥
jeongsik	定食	*soba* (J.)	蕎麥
		udon (J.)	饂飩

(J.: Japanese)

Appendix: Consumption of Ramyeon

(Unit: Bag or Serving)

State \ Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
1 China, Hong Kong	390.0	442.6	467.9	501.1	451.7
2 Indonesia	120.1	124.0	140.9	149.9	137.0
3 Japan	55.4	54.3	54.4	54.6	51.0
4 United States	38.0	39.0	40.4	42.4	43.2
5 Vietnam	24.8	26.0	34.0	39.1	39.1
6 Korea	36.5	34.0	33.7	32.2	33.4
7 Philippines	25.0	24.8	25.0	24.8	25.0
8 Thailand	17.8	19.2	20.5	22.2	21.7
9 Russia	15.2	16.0	18.0	19.0	20.0
10 India	4.3	5.8	8.0	12.0	15.6
11 Brazil	11.5	12.6	13.8	14.3	14.9
12 Nigeria	6.0	6.5	7.0	10.8	14.0
13 Malaysia	8.7	8.9	10.6	11.8	12.1
14 Mexico	10.0	10.0	9.0	9.0	8.6
15 Taiwan	9.5	8.9	8.7	8.8	8.4
16 Saudi Arabia, Arab Emirates	5.0	5.5	6.0	6.7	6.9
17 Nepal	3.7	3.7	3.9	4.3	5.1
18 Ukraine					5.0
19 Poland, Hungary, Czech	2.3	2.3	2.5	2.7	3.0
20 United Kingdom	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.6
21 Cambodia	1.7	1.7	1.7	2.1	2.4
22 Myanmar	0.7	0.7	0.7	2.2	2.1
23 Canada	1.8	1.8	1.9	2.0	2.0
24 Germany	1.4	1.4	1.8	1.8	1.8
25 Australia	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5
26 Bangladesh					1.5
27 Singapore	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.3
28 Fiji	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
29 South Africa	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
30 New Zealand	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
31 France	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
32 Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3
33 Costa Rica	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.2
34 The Netherlands	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
35 Peru	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
36 Belgium	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
37 Others	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Total (100 million servings)	799.8	860.0	920.8	984.2	936.0

Source: World Instant Noodle Association.