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Noodles, traditionally and today

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ABSTRACT

Chinese noodles originated in the Han dynasty, which has more than 4,000 years of history. There are many stories about the origin of noodles. To a certain extent, noodles also reflect the cultural traditions and customs of China, which essentially means “human nature” and “worldly common sense”. There are thousands of varieties of noodles in China, according to the classification of the shape of noodles, seasoning gravy, cooking craft, and so on. Many noodles have local characteristics. Noodles are accepted by people from all over the world. The industrial revolution and the development of the food industry realized the transition from a traditional handicraft industry to mass production using machinery. In addition, the invention of instant noodles and their mass production also greatly changed the noodle industry. In essence, noodles are a kind of cereal food, which is the main body of the traditional Chinese diet. It is the main source of energy for Chinese people and the most economical energy food. Adhering to the principle of “making cereal food the main food”, is to maintain our Chinese good diet tradition, which can avoid the disadvantages of a high energy, high fat, and low carbohydrate diet, and promote health. The importance of the status of noodles in the dietary structure of residents in our country and the health impact should not be ignored.

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1. The origin of noodles

Chinese noodles originated in the Han dynasty (汉代) [1]. At that time, they were collectively referred to as *cake* (饼). When noodles were cooked in soup, it was called *soup cake* (汤饼). There were various kinds of shapes for noodles, such as sheets and strips. Sheets of noodles are cooked by pulling the dough into sheets and cooking in a pot with boiling water. In the Wei (魏), Jin (晋), and Northern and Southern Dynasties (南北朝), the shapes of the noodles gradually increased. Two special kinds of noodles, called *shui yin* (水引) and *bo tuo* (饅头), were included in the book *Qi Min Yao Shu* (齐民要术) in the middle ancient era [2]. *Shui yin* is cooked by pulling the dough into strips as thick as chopsticks, cutting these into segments 30 cm long, soaking in a dish of water, then pressing them into flat noodles shaped as a leek leaf and cooking in a pot with boiling water. *Bo tuo* is especially smooth and delicious. In the Sui, Tang, and Five dynasty periods, there were more varieties of noodles. With the increase of noodle varieties, the methods and

techniques of cooking have been continuously improved. There was a kind of cold noodle with a unique flavor, called *Leng tao* (冷淘), which was appreciated by the great poet Du Fu (杜甫), describing it “as cold as snow when gliding through the teeth (经齿冷于雪)”. There was another kind of noodle with full tenacity, referred to as “one of the seven wonderful health foods”, which has a saying “wet noodles can be used to tie the shoe”. In the Song (宋) and Yuan (元) dynasty period, *fine dried noodles* (挂面) appeared, such as *pig and sheep raw noodles* (猪羊庵生面) and *vegetable raw noodles* (素面) sold in Linan (临安) city during the Southern Song (南宋) period. Until the Ming (明) and Qing (清) Dynasty, there were more varieties of noodles. In the Qing dynasty, *five spicy noodles* (五香面) and *eight treasures noodles* (八珍面) were included in *Xian Qing Ou Ji* (闲情偶寄) by dramatist Li Yu (李渔) [3]. These two kinds of noodles were made of five and eight kinds of animal and plant raw material powder, respectively, and mixed into flour, which were considered as top grade noodles.

2. The stories of noodles

Food is not only a source of human nutrition, it also plays many roles in the aspects of religion and economy, etc. People use special food to celebrate important events and festivals, for instance, we

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eat sweet dumplings (元宵) in the Lantern Festival (元宵节), we eat traditional Chinese rice-puddings (粽子) in the Dragon Boat Festival (端午节), we eat moon cakes (月饼) in the Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节), and we eat dumplings (饺子) in Spring Festival (春节).

In the aspect of noodles, Chinese people have lots of customs, which essentially mean “human nature” and “worldly common sense” materialized in the noodles. At birthdays, people eat *longevity noodles* (长寿面); at the time of marriage and moving into a new house people eat noodles with gravy (打卤面), which means flavored life; on the day of lunar February 2 “dragon head (龙抬头)”, people eat *dragon whiskers noodles* (龙须面) to look forward to good weather. We eat different noodles in different seasons and different festivals.

Famous noodles in China have a unique value of traditional culture. *Seafood noodles* (三鲜伊面) are also called *dutiful son's noodle* (孝子面). According to historical records, Yi Yin's (伊尹) mother was perennially sick and bedridden. So he made noodles with eggs and flour, and then steamed and fried these noodles. Even if he was not at home it was convenient for his mother to eat these nonperishable noodles. The noodles were added to a soup made with chicken, pig bones, and seafood. Under the tender care of Yi Yin, his mother soon recovered. This was the reason why *seafood noodles* are also called *dutiful son's noodles*. The processing method of *seafood noodles* in ancient time was very similar to industrialized manufacturing methods of instant noodles in modern times.

Sichuan (四川) *dandan noodles* (担担面) (Fig. 1) are known to every family. In the old days, hawkers sold noodles on the street with a shoulder pole, giving the name *dandan noodles*. There was a pot and stove on the shoulder pole, which made it convenient to cook noodles with full seasoning at any time. The business philosophy of wholehearted customer service is the essence for *dandan noodles* to stay prosperous. Qishan (岐山) *minced noodles* (臊子面) (Fig. 2) with special flavor, also called *ashamed son noodles* (臊子面), also has a story in Shaanxi (陕西). Qishan *minced noodles* were originally called *sister-in-law noodles* (嫂子面). Previously, there was a poor scholar, whose parents died when he was young. He was raised by his elder brother and sister-in-law. In order to let him read books for fame, his sister-in-law made noodles for him. His sister-in-law was not only good at cooking noodles, but also good at making gravy with meat and vegetables. Oil sprinkled over chili was also mixed in noodles to increase appetite. Under the care of his sister-in-law, he passed the provincial civil service examination as expected under the old Chinese examination system. Therefore, it was also called *sister in law noodles*. Later, many people followed



Fig. 2. Qi shan minced noodles.

the example of cooking noodles to seek fame for their children, but repeatedly failed. Feeling shame for their son, the noodles were also called *ashamed son noodles*, which was pronounced as *sào zi* in Chinese. Guangxi (广西) *vinegar-pepper old friend noodles* (老友面) has a story about friendship. Once upon a time, there was a Zhou teahouse where a customer drank tea almost every day. For a few days, the teahouse owner Zhou found the regular customer did not come to tea. Out of concern for an old friend, he went to visit him. He discovered that the old friend was sick. The shopkeeper quickly made a bowl of vinegar-pepper noodle soup with sautéed garlic and fermented black beans and sent the noodles to his friend. The old friend ate the noodles in a sweat and then recovered. So vinegar-pepper noodles have another name *old friend noodles*.

3. The classification of noodles

There are thousands of varieties of noodles in China, according to the classification of the composition of noodles, the shapes of noodles, and the different gravy seasoning. The main compositions of noodles are wheat and rice. Most kinds of noodles are made of flour (the powder made from wheat). There is also another special composition of noodles: rice noodles (米线). Rice noodles are frequently seen in Southern style cooking, such as Yunnan (云南) province: *over-the-bridge rice noodles* (过桥米线) (Fig. 3). In addition, noodles can be classified according to the thickness: they can



Fig. 1. Sichua dandan noodles.



Fig. 3. Yunnan over-the-bridge rice noodles.

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