

From Pyongyang to Netflix

Naengmyŏn in Modern Korean History

Sunho Ko

This article examines naengmyŏn¹ (Korean cold noodles) with a focus on how a regional specialty of the northern provinces evolved into a national and, eventually, global dish. Focusing on the twentieth century, the article situates this transformation within broader historical forces, including colonialism, nationalism, war, industrialization, the Cold War, and globalization. By analyzing these evolving historical contexts, it argues that naengmyŏn is not merely a mundane food item, but one whose meanings have been continually redefined in relation to changing political, economic, and cultural conditions in Korea and beyond.

Introduction

A bundle of buckwheat noodles sits in a chilled beef broth with ice. The noodles are topped with slices of beef and cucumber and half a boiled egg. Common garnishes include pickled radish, cucumber, and pear, though variations across restaurants make it difficult to define a single standard. Diners often add vinegar and mustard, enhancing the sharp, refreshing quality of the cold broth and the chewy texture of the noodles. Believed to originate in Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea, and its surrounding region, this cold noodle soup (naengmyŏn) is now a popular dish for Koreans seeking relief from the summer heat. In recent years, it has also gained global recognition as part of the so-called Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), alongside pop music, television dramas, and food items such as *kimchi* (fermented cabbage) and *bulgogi* (marinated grilled beef). Somewhat surprisingly, however, naengmyŏn was not originally a summer dish but a winter food. Once a regional specialty of the northern Korean peninsula, it was traditionally eaten during the cold months, often enjoyed indoors on a heated floor called *ondol*.² Over time, it has been transformed into a special summer dish in Korea, while also serving as a kind of culinary archive reflecting the peninsula's historical ruptures. The trajectory of naengmyŏn—from a regional cuisine of northern Korea to a Cold War symbol and, more recently, a globally recognized Korean food—can be read as reflecting the broader course of modern Korean history, shaped by both local and global forces including colonial modernization, war and displacement, Cold War rivalry, industrialization, and the globalization of Korean culture.



Figure 1: Pyongyang-style naengmyŏn.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The Origin of Naengmyŏn and Its Modern Transformations

Although naengmyŏn is often regarded today as a quintessentially Korean dish, its modern form emerged through a long process of social and technological transformation shaped by both national and global forces in modern Korean history. The origin of the dish is unclear, but its more immediate roots can be traced to the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1897), when it was primarily a winter delicacy associated with northern Korea.³ By the mid-18th century, the dish had achieved its basic form: cold buckwheat noodles garnished with meat, fruit, and vegetables in a chilled broth of *tongch'imi* (fermented water kimchi). This combination of cold buckwheat and kimchi brine was a direct response to the peninsula's geography and climate. Because the mountainous northern regions were ill-suited for wheat cultivation due to the hot, humid summers, wheat noodles remained a luxury reserved for special occasions like weddings or birthdays. In contrast, buckwheat was a hardy crop well-adapted to colder climates and marginal soils. The seasonal cycle of the buckwheat harvest in autumn, paired with the natural availability of cold fermentation brine in winter, established the early culinary logic of the dish as a refreshing, acidic winter specialty.

Long before the twentieth century, naengmyŏn had begun to circulate beyond its northern origins. During the late Chosŏn period, the growth of urban markets facilitated the spread of regional dishes to major cities. A late 18th-century map of Pyongyang even identifies a specific “naengmyŏn street,” suggesting the early existence of a commercial restaurant culture. Seoul, the capital of Chosŏn dynasty and, later, the capital of South Korea, also became a vital hub where northern migrants and merchants introduced the dish to a broader urban clientele, including kings and Confucian elites. By the late nineteenth century, the dish had already begun its transition from a regional specialty into a commercial urban staple.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, urbanization accelerated these changes. As Korean cities expanded under the Taehan Empire (1897–1910) and subsequent Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), noodle shops proliferated in urban centers including Pyongyang and Seoul. The dish's status was



Figure 2: Aginomoto ad in colonial Korea. Source: *TongA Ilbo*, December 17, 1931.

cemented by its inclusion on the menus of luxury venues like the Hwasin Department Store in Seoul. Modern urban life also birthed new distribution methods: the telephone allowed for remote ordering, while bicycle delivery enabled restaurants to transport bowls quickly across neighborhoods. This practice reflected both a growing demand for convenience and the emerging rhythms of modern city life.

Technological innovations further reshaped the dish's production. The introduction of mechanical noodle presses in the 1930s marked a significant change. Before mechanization, producing buckwheat noodles was physically grueling, requiring the cook to use their entire body weight to press dough through heavy molds. Mechanical presses dramatically reduced this labor and ensured consistency. Refrigeration also fundamentally altered the seasonal nature of the dish. Historically, the broth relied on *tongch'imi* (water kimchi) brine, which was only naturally available in the colder months. While records show that elites and kings occasionally enjoyed the dish in summer using ice from state-run storehouses called *sŏkpinggo*, it was only with the spread of commercial ice storage and mechanical refrigeration in the early 20th century that the masses could enjoy it year-round. Consequently, naengmyŏn shifted from a winter delicacy to a summer obsession used to quench the scorching heat. This shift also changed the broth's composition. Restaurants began favoring chilled meat broths over kimchi brine, which was difficult to keep fresh during the summer.

This transition coincided with the rise of modern food science, specifically the introduction of monosodium glutamate (MSG). In the early 20th century, the Japanese brand Ajinomoto popularized MSG in colonial Korea as a magical product of science that could enhance any flavor.⁴ The Japanese company targeted naengmyŏn restaurant owners, offering them a convenient way to replicate the deep flavor of long-simmered meat broths without the associated time or cost. One Ajinomoto advertisement even framed the relationship as a simple formula: *naengmyŏn + Ajinomoto = beautiful taste*. In this way, naengmyŏn became incorporated into the broader industrial food systems of the Japanese empire. Through these intertwined processes of commercialization, urbanization, mechanization, and the application of food science, naengmyŏn was transformed into the modern urban food.

Naengmyŏn in South Korea: War, Displacement, and Adaptation

The history of naengmyŏn took another decisive turn in the mid-twentieth century with the national division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Large numbers of refugees fled southward from northern regions, carrying their regional culinary traditions with them. In the process, naengmyŏn became, for many, a visible and emotionally charged symbol of a lost northern homeland.

For many displaced northerners, naengmyŏn in the South functioned as more than simply a familiar dish. It came to be associated, for many first-generation migrants, with survival, memory, and nostalgia. Many of South Korea's well-known naengmyŏn establishments trace their origins back to this period of wartime turmoil. Chang Wŏn-il, the founder of Uraeok (or Woo Lae Ok)—arguably the most famous naengmyŏn restaurant in Seoul—began his business in 1946 after migrating from Pyongyang.⁵ Similarly, Pyongyang Myŏnok in Seoul was founded by Pyŏn Chŏng-suk, who opened the restaurant as a means of survival after fleeing south during the war. For these refugees, preparing and consuming naengmyŏn allowed them to recreate fragments of their former lives and communities.

The migration of northern populations also introduced distinct regional variations to the South, most notably the Pyongyang and Hamhung styles (the latter associated with the northeastern city of Hamhung). Pyongyang naengmyŏn is typically characterized by mild buckwheat noodles served in a clear, delicate beef broth. In contrast, Hamhung naengmyŏn features starchier noodles with a chewy texture, often topped with a spicy seasoning and raw fish. Hamhung Naengmyŏn, a well-known restaurant for this style, was established in 1953 in Seoul by another northern refugee, Han Hye-sŏn. In postwar South Korea, these culinary distinctions became markers of regional identity.



Figure 3: Hamhung-style naengmyŏn. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The disruptions of war also sparked entirely new culinary adaptations, most famously milmyŏn in the southern port city of Busan. Refugees attempting to recreate naengmyŏn in Busan faced a practical hurdle. Buckwheat was scarce in the wartime economy. Instead, they turned to wheat flour provided through American military aid.⁶ By substituting buckwheat with wheat, noodle makers developed a new dish that mimicked the form of naengmyŏn but possessed a distinct texture and flavor profile. Naeho Naengmyŏn, a legendary establishment in Busan, exemplifies this adaptation. Its founder, Yi Yŏng-sun, utilized imported U.S. wheat to replace the unavailable buckwheat, demonstrating how refugee ingenuity and wartime scarcity could generate entirely new traditions.

The division of Korea and the Korean War reshaped naengmyŏn—not only geographically but also symbolically. What had once been a regional cold noodle dish of the northern peninsula became a marker of displacement and longing for a lost homeland for North Korean migrants, especially first-generation refugees. At the same time, the dish was widely embraced by South Korean consumers, whether recognizing such sentiment or not.

Naengmyŏn in North Korea: A Socialist Dish

In the decades following national division and the Korean War, naengmyŏn developed along a distinct trajectory in North Korea. As the Cold War intensified, both North and South Korea sought to demonstrate the superiority of their respective political and economic systems, and food became one arena for this competition. Each state attempted to prove that its system could provide superior nutrition, abundance, and everyday comfort to its citizens.⁷ In this context, naengmyŏn was elevated as an important symbol of the socialist modernity of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

A defining feature of North Korea's food culture, especially, in the reconstruction years in the wake of the Korean war, was the socialization of dining. Rather than relying on private enterprises, the socialist state promoted large-scale public dining facilities designed to serve workers and urban residents collectively. Following the full-scale collectivization of agriculture and commerce in the late 1950s, these establishments were intended to embody the ideals of modern socialist life while ensuring efficient mass provision. Restaurants became public institutions integrated into the planned economy, and dining out was reframed as a collective, modern lifestyle.



Figure 4: As a mecca of Pyongyang-style naengmyŏn, Ongnyugwan was constructed in 1960, combining traditional Korean architectural elements with modernist design. Source: *Kŏnch'uk kwa kŏnsŏl* (Aug. 1960), 44.

A prominent example of this model was the opening of Ongnyugwan (or Okryugwan in a more common spelling) in 1960. Situated on the banks of the Taedong River in central Pyongyang, Ongnyugwan became the most celebrated restaurant in the country and was central to the state's effort to institutionalize Pyongyang-style naengmyŏn as a national culinary icon. Celebrating its opening, North Korean architectural journals proudly described the building as a massive dining complex capable of serving more than 2,000 people at once, with dozens of dining rooms and a banquet hall that could seat hundreds of guests.⁸ This immense scale reflected the socialist emphasis on mass provision and the importance of collective consumption in the public sphere.

Over time, Ongnyugwan became more than just a restaurant. It evolved into a showcase of North Korean cuisine for foreign visitors and diplomatic guests. During the inter-Korean summit held in Pyongyang in 2018, for example, South Korean president Moon Jae-in famously dined there, bringing renewed international attention to the restaurant and its iconic cold noodles. This episode illustrates how naengmyŏn can be mobilized in diplomatic contexts as a marker of shared cultural identity.

Additionally, the North Korean state has increasingly emphasized Pyongyang-style cold noodles as a distinctive national tradition both domestically and internationally. The government began actively promoting the name *Pyongyang Raengmyon* (North Korean pronunciation and spelling of naengmyŏn) in the late twentieth century, linking the dish explicitly to the capital city. This effort culminated in 2022, when the tradition of Pyongyang Raengmyon was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.⁹



Figure 5: Ongnyugwan, Pyongyang (2007). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Naengmyŏn Today: Authenticity and Global Spread

In the twenty-first century, naengmyŏn has entered another phase of transformation, marked by renewed public fascination, debates over authenticity, and growing global visibility. While not an entirely new phenomenon, this renewed interest in the dish can be understood within the context of globalization and the influential role of digital and social media. In South Korea, what might be called a contemporary naengmyŏn mania has emerged, fueled by media coverage, online discussions, and a thriving restaurant culture. In 2010, the celebrated cartoonist Hŏ Yŏng-man published several episodes on the dish in his bestselling culinary comic series *Sikkaek* (“The Gourmet”), helping introduce its history and regional varieties to a wide readership.¹⁰ Academic and journalistic works on naengmyŏn also proliferated during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Food critics, bloggers, and everyday diners actively debate which restaurant serves the most authentic version of the dish, turning naengmyŏn into a subject of culinary competition and cultural commentary. Restaurants specializing in naengmyŏn have become destinations for devoted food enthusiasts. Diners now compare subtle differences in noodle texture, broth flavor, and toppings, often engaging in spirited debates about what defines a proper bowl. Particular attention is paid to the elasticity and grain composition of the noodles, as well as the clarity and balance of the broth. These discussions suggest how many contemporary diners approach traditional foods with an increasingly refined and analytical sensibility.

Such discussions sometimes produce surprising conclusions about authenticity. Although Pyongyang is widely regarded as the birthplace of the dish, some critics argue that certain South Korean restaurants now preserve what they consider a more “authentic” Pyongyang-style flavor than those currently served in North Korea. The famous Pyongyang restaurant Ongnyugwan is often cited as the iconic home of Pyongyang naengmyŏn. Yet some observers claim that the proportion of buckwheat in its noodles has declined over time, producing a texture different from earlier traditions. As a result, several South Korean establishments are praised for maintaining higher buckwheat ratios and flavors closer to what diners imagine as the original taste.¹¹

In recent years, naengmyŏn has gained visibility far beyond the Korean Peninsula. Korean restaurants around the world now feature the dish, reflecting the broader global interest in Korean cuisine. In 2021,

Netflix released a documentary on the dish, *Korean Cold Noodle Rhapsody*, highlighting its rise in popularity. Mass-produced, packaged naengmyŏn have also contributed to the global popularity of the dish. As South Korea's food industry expanded, companies began applying the technologies developed for ramyŏn production to other noodle dishes. Large manufacturers such as Nongshim and CJ Foods started producing packaged versions of naengmyŏn that could be sold in supermarkets and prepared quickly at home. These products made naengmyŏn far more accessible. What had once been a dish typically eaten at specialized restaurants could now be prepared in a matter of minutes in ordinary kitchens across the globe.

In this global context, naengmyŏn continues to evolve, adapting to new ingredients, dining environments, and consumer expectations. The global spread of the dish further complicates questions of authenticity, as chefs and diners reinterpret what "traditional" Korean flavors mean in different cultural settings.¹² The more widely the dish travels across regions and borders, the more intensely people debate its origins and authentic form. Rather than resolving these debates, however, the history of naengmyŏn suggests that authenticity itself is a dynamic and contested concept constructed through historical memory, culinary practice, and public discussion.

Conclusion

From its origins as a seasonal winter staple in the northern Korean peninsula, to its adaptation as a survival food in the refugee camps in South Korea, and ultimately to its emergence as a globally recognized dish, naengmyŏn has been shaped by historical forces surrounding the Korean peninsula. Today, whether it is served in the grand halls of Ongnyugwan, debated by noodle mania in Seoul, or prepared from a mass-produced packet in a global kitchen, the dish remains a culinary archive reflecting the history of the Korean peninsula. Rather than carrying a single, stable significance, the dish has acquired new meanings as it has moved across geographic boundaries and political, economic, and cultural systems.

Notes

¹ The most widely used academic romanization, the McCune-Reischauer system, renders Korean cold noodles as naengmyŏn, but naengmyeon is the more familiar spelling for a general audience. In this article, well-known city names such as Seoul, Pyongyang, Hamhung, and Busan are presented in their commonly used forms rather than in the McCune-Reischauer system.

² Ondol is a traditional Korean underfloor heating system that transfers heat from a fireplace to the floor. Despite modern renovations, underfloor heating remains in use in contemporary Korean housing.

³ Kang Myŏng-kwan, *Naengmyŏn ūi yŏksa [The History of Naengmyŏn]* (P'urŭn yŏksa, 2025) provides the most comprehensive history on the noodle soup, in particular, from its ancient root to the colonial period. Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section comes from this book.

⁴ For a history of MSG, see Jordan Sand, "A Short History of MSG: Good Science, Bad Science, and Taste Cultures," *Gastronomica* 5, no. 4 (2005), 38-49.

⁵ Unless specified, the information on the naengmyŏn restaurants in this section is from Paek Hyŏn-sŏk and Chŏe Hyerim, *Naengmyŏn yŏlchŏn [The Chronicle of Naengmyŏn]* (Inmul kwa sasangsa, 2014).

⁶ For more details about US wheat aid, see Dajeong Chung, "The Cold War History of Wheat Flour in South Korea, 1945-1960: The Discourse of Corruption and the April Revolution of 1960," *Cold War History* 25, no. 1 (2025), 1-22.

⁷ For more details on Cold War rivalry over food, see Kataryna J. Cwiertka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War Food in Twentieth-Century Korea* (Reaktion Books, 2012).

⁸ "Taedonggang kisŭl Ongnyu pawŭ wi e uahage sinch'uktoen Ongnyugwan" [Ongnyugwan, Elegantly Newly Built on Ongnyu Rock along the Taedong River], *Kŏnch'uk kwa kŏnsŏl* (Aug. 1960), 44-47.

⁹ Maria Osetrova, "Pyongyang Raengmyon as a Constructed National Food Symbol of the DPRK," *S/N Korean Humanities* 10, no.2 (2024), 49-70.

¹⁰ Hŏ Yŏng-man, *Sikk'aek 27: P'aldo naengmyŏn yŏhaengi* [Gourmet 27: A Journey Through Eight Provinces Naengmyŏn] (Kimyŏngsa, 2010).

¹¹ Paek & Chŏe, *Naengmyŏn yŏlchŏn*, 229-272.

¹² See the Netflix documentary. See also Sonia Ryang, "A Global Slurp: Naengmyeon Noodles" in *Eating Korean in America: Gastronomic Ethnography of Authenticity* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. Had you heard of naengmyŏn before reading this article or had you ever eaten it? If so, how did you encounter it? What role does globalization and in particular global media play in shaping your experience?
2. Naengmyŏn has undergone significant modern transformations. How did modern technologies and social changes contribute to this shift?
3. How has naengmyŏn become a dish associated with war, displacement, and survival? How might personal or family memories of this dish connect to larger national histories?
4. Can you think of a food in your own life that connects to a broader historical experience? Can you think of any comparable foods in other cultures that carry similar political or historical meanings?
5. The North Korean state has promoted naengmyŏn as a representative national dish, including efforts to have it recognized as cultural heritage by UNESCO. Do you think naengmyŏn from Ongnyugwan in Pyongyang is the most "authentic" version? Or do you think some South Korean restaurants better preserve its "authentic" taste? What does it mean for a food to be authentic?

Further Readings and Resources

1. General Overview of Naengmyŏn

1.1. Netflix documentary, *Korean Cold Noodle Rhapsody* (2021) is an excellent overview of the culinary world of naengmyŏn. The documentary can be accessed for free through the YouTube channel of KBS (Korea Broadcasting System).

Episode 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=764D8GmPAIo>

Episode 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqrF5bYAuKU>

1.2. "Guide to naengmyeon, Korea's summer noodles," *The Korea Times*, June 28, 2025

<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/travel-food/20250628/guide-to-naengmyeon-koreas-summer-noodles>

1.3. "Where to try different types of naengmyeon, from Pyongyang to Busan styles," *The Korea Times*, June 28, 2025:

<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/travel-food/20250628/where-to-try-different-types-of-korean-naengmyeon-from-pyongyang-to-busan-styles>

This newspaper article features a list of well-known South Korean naengmyŏn restaurants, along with brief descriptions of each.

1.4. Lee Hae-rin, “Wheat noodles that comforted homesick N. Korean refugees are now Busan specialty,” *The Korea Times*, Dec. 21, 2023:

<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/travel-food/20231221/wheat-noodles-that-comforted-homesick-n-korean-refugees-are-now-busan-specialty>

This detailed newspaper article on Naeho Naengmyŏn can be used as a case study to discuss North Korean refugees’ adaptations of naengmyŏn in South Korea.

2. Food Production and Consumption in the Cold War Context

These four works do not address naengmyŏn directly, but they provide valuable insights into food production and consumption in the Cold War Koreas.

2.1. Dajeong Chung, “The Cold War History of Wheat Flour in South Korea, 1945–1960: the Discourse of Corruption and the April Revolution of 1960,” *Cold War History* 25, no. 1 (2025), 1–22.

2.2. Tae-Ho Kim, “The Good, the Bad, and the Foreign: Trajectories of Three Grains in Modern South Korea,” in Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell eds., *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 130–149.

2.3. Sunho Ko & Derek J. Kramer, “Let’s Turn the Grass into Meat’: Animal Husbandry as Women’s Work in Cold War North Korea,” *Gender & History* 38, no. 2 (2026), 658–671.

2.4. Kataryna J. Cwiartka, *Cuisine, Colonialism and Cold War Food in Twentieth-Century Korea* (Reaktion Books, 2012).

2.5. “Summit menu prompts interest in N. Korean cold noodles,” *Arirang News*, Apr 30, 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZFRR_zf4vgc

This news report includes video footage of the 2018 Inter-Korean Summit and the surge in popularity of naengmyŏn that followed.

3. Globalized Consumption of Naengmyŏn

3.1. Eric Kim, “A Singular Slurp,” *New York Times Magazine*, Nov 26, 2023, 18–19.

This article, written by a chef and New York Times food columnist, can be used as an example of how naengmyŏn is consumed within the context of globalization.

3.2. Sonia Ryang, “A Global Slurp: Naengmyeon Noodles” in *Eating Korean in America: Gastronomic Ethnography of Authenticity* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

This work offers a more scholarly analysis of the global consumption of naengmyŏn.

3.3. “Instant naengmyeon kits to enjoy cold noodles at home,” *The Korea Times*, June 28, 2025: <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/lifestyle/travel-food/20250628/instant-naengmyeon-kits-to-enjoy-korean-cold-noodles-at-home>

This article includes a brief history of instant naengmyŏn.

3.4. Kyung Koo Han, “Noodle Odyssey: East Asia and Beyond,” *Korea Journal* 50, no. 1 (2010), 60–84.

This article on the history of noodles in Korea and East Asia provides a broader context for understanding naengmyŏn as part of noodle culture.

4. UNESCO's Recognition of Pyongyang Raengmyon

4.1. Pyongyang Raengmyon Custom by UNESCO, Sep. 19, 2021:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf-UqTB2TQQ>

This video submitted by the North Korean state to UNESCO can be used to discuss the North Korean state's efforts to present naengmyŏn as a valuable national cuisine.

The following two works provide a scholarly analysis of the politics behind UNESCO's recognition of Pyongyang Raengmyon

4.2. Kim Jongsuk, "Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Pyongyang Raengmyon Custom," *S/N Korean Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2023), 47-68

<https://doi.org/10.17783/IHU.2023.9.2.47>

4.3. Maria Osetrova, "Pyongyang Raengmyon as a Constructed National Food Symbol of the DPRK," *S/N Korean Humanities* 10, no.2 (2024), 49-70.

<https://doi.org/10.17783/IHU.2024.10.2.49>

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