Culture Notes
Noodles on a Bicycle

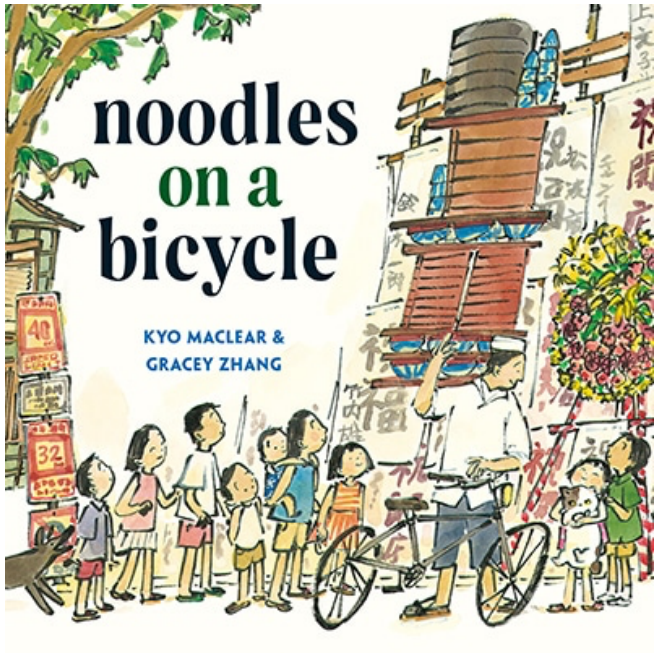
Illustrated by Gracey Zhang **By Kyo Maclear**

Random House Studio, 2024 **Fiction, set in Japan**

2024 Of Note, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Noodles on a Bicycle takes us back to a once-common sight on the busy streets of downtown Tokyo. Balancing towering trays of noodles on their shoulders, the *demae*, or cycling deliverymen, would cruise along busy streets with only one hand gripping the handlebar.

Demae saw their heyday from the 1930s to the 1970s. The bicycles were eventually replaced by motorbikes, but *demae* still linger in the memories of generations of Japanese noodle lovers and are an enduring chapter in the history of Japan's centuries-long noodle culture.





Tokyo soba delivery in 1956
https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/japan-soba-delivery-old-photos/

Although scholars continue to debate exactly where noodles first originated, archaeological evidence shows that noodle-like food was eaten in China thousands of years ago. As noodle traditions spread across East Asia, different societies adapted them to local ingredients and tastes. They can be made from wheat, rice, millet, buckwheat, mung beans, and other ingredients. They may be thin or thick, flat or round, and can be boiled, stir-fried, steamed, or served cold. Different regions also developed specialized techniques. Noodles can be hand-pulled, cut, or shaved, demonstrating the craftsmanship involved in traditional food preparation.

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Noodles are an important part of everyday life in Japan. Although noodles have a long history across Asia, Japan developed many distinctive noodle traditions. Some of the best-known examples are udon, soba, and ramen. Udon noodles are thick, soft, and chewy, while soba noodles are thinner and are usually made from buckwheat. Soba can be served hot or cold, depending on the dish and the season. Ramen were introduced to Japan from China in the late nineteenth century; by the mid-twentieth century these wheat noodles had become popular throughout the country. Different regions of Japan are known for different styles of noodles, and families may have their own favorite ways to prepare and eat them.



Noodles in hot broth, Yokohama
(photo by Brenda G. Jordan)



Chilled soba noodles with tempura are a popular summer dish in Nagano prefecture
(photo by Brenda G. Jordan)

Noodles can also have special cultural meaning. One example is *toshikoshi soba*, or "year-crossing noodles," traditionally eaten on New Year's Eve. These long noodles are associated with longevity and good fortune, while the custom of eating them at the end of the year symbolizes moving from the old year into the new one.

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Ramen in hot broth (on the right)
(photo by Brenda G. Jordan)

Noodles therefore offer more than nourishment. Their ingredients, preparation methods, regional varieties, and symbolic meaning reveal how everyday food can preserve history, express cultural values, and connect generations. A simple bowl of noodles can represent centuries of culinary creativity and cultural tradition.

Author: Sophia Geng, Professor, James and Margaret Tseng Loe Chair for China Studies, Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, PA
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