

# **SOUTHEAST ASIAN FOOD AND CULTURE**

by

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

- A. Grades: 9th - 12th grade (high school)
- B. Topic: Southeast Asian food and its influence on culture
- C. Scope: This module includes a lesson plan for an academic school week. Four sections, four days, although these may be combined.
- D. Goals:
  1. General objectives:
    - a. Students will become familiar with some of the food of Southeast Asia.
    - b. Students will become familiar with various examples of how culture has been shaped through the influence of food within Southeast Asia.
  2. Specific objectives:
    - a. Students will learn the basic geography of this region.
    - b. Students will participate in an activity to digest the information in the lectures.
    - c. Students will relate the information to their own culture and daily lives through group collaboration and participation.
    - d. Students will learn to prepare a Southeast Asian meal.
- E. Materials:
  1. map of Southeast Asia
  2. slide projector and slides (or visit the picture database on [www.seasite.niu.edu](http://www.seasite.niu.edu))
  3. access to a school kitchen and appropriate ingredients for particular recipes.

## **II. OVERVIEW OF FOOD AND CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

- A. Food
  1. Statistics: More than 3/4 of the Southeast Asia population is agriculture-based. Twice as much fish is consumed in this region compared to other forms of animal protein, reflecting the long coastlines and river environments of Southeast Asia. The staple food throughout the region is rice, which has been cultivated for thousands of years. Rice serves as the basic staple food for more than half of the world's population today.
  2. General Information: Simple daily meals and elaborate feasts characterize all Southeast Asian culinary cultures. Cooking is economically efficient as people use wok cooking, which requires a low amount of fuel and makes deep-frying easy. Also, meat and vegetables are typically chopped into small pieces prior to cooking, which mean that food cooks very quickly. Most food is cooked by quick blanching or stir-frying and steaming. Southeast Asians are concerned with nutrition, economy, and ease of preparation as it relates to their food.

Due to the close proximity of the borders between countries in Southeast Asia, and to combined influences from India and China that have affected indigenous taste and cooking styles, the ingredients are similar throughout most of the region while they are nonetheless manipulated by each culture to suit their palate and taste.

Most often, food is consumed in Southeast Asia on a mat raised off the ground traditionally. Modern homes may use a table and chairs. Generally, food is eaten at room temperature, as the climate is quite warm throughout the year.

In Asia, there are different styles of eating food. In India and the Middle East, as well as Southeast Asia, people eat food with their hands. It is a very direct way to experience the texture of the food, and people normally wash their hands before and after each meal. Normally, only the right hand is used, so that one knows to keep it especially clean. Generally, the foods to be eaten are placed on plates in the center of the mat or table, and people take food in small portions as they eat.

The exception to this pattern is Vietnam, where the influence of China was much stronger than anywhere else in Southeast Asia. Here, each person has chopsticks, and food is served and apportioned onto individual plates or into individual bowls. A similar pattern is found in other Asian countries where Chinese influence was especially strong, e.g., Japan, Tibet, and Korea.

The influence of Western cultures is found not only in the use of tables and chairs in many modern Southeast Asian households, but also in the use of spoons and forks. Knives are not necessary, since meat and vegetables are chopped into smaller portions before cooking or serving. A large spoon is held in the right hand, while the left hand is used to shovel food into the spoon.

3. Milk-related products: Southeast Asians, unlike cultures in northern and central Asia, do not use milk in the way that Europeans and Americans do. While bread has become popular as a snack or breakfast food item in countries that were colonized by European nations, most Southeast Asians do not consider milk, yogurt, cheese, and other dairy foods to be a popular source of nutrition. Instead, soy-bean milk, soy-bean paste, and soy sauce are alternative food preferences for most people, with evaporated milk and modern-day substitutes commonly used to sweeten coffee or prepare desserts. Coconut milk, as a very different and indigenous product, is widely used as well.

4. Specific food information: The food consumed in Southeast Asia varies not only by country, but by religious and ethnic tradition. This diversity makes Southeast Asian food a fascinating, if life-long (!), adventure to people who try to master such cooking. Here are a few themes. Both Indian and Chinese influences are present in the foods of Southeast Asia, as well as Western influences today.

a. Indian cooking has influenced much of Southeast Asia. However, Indian cooking varies throughout the country and according to ethnic and religious preference. Most know that Muslims do not eat pork, and that the month of Ramadan (the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar) is a time of fasting for Muslims all over the world. Muslims may neither eat nor drink during the daylight hours of this month.

Hindus, in contrast, find that cows are sacred and the eating of beef is forbidden. Others, especially of the high caste or from the south of India, are vegetarians. China is much more eclectic, and the Chinese who follow Taoist traditions believe that food should be combined in ways that have medicinal or healing properties. Some foods are "hot", and should be avoided by pregnant women or those with high blood pressure. Examples of hot foods include chili peppers and ginger. Other foods are "cool", such as eggplant, and should be eaten by people who wish to lower their blood pressure. The popularity of wheat in northern China also led to their development of noodles as a staple of many dishes. By all of these means, people believe they can effectively regulate their body processes and reactions.

Buddhists, too, are expected to not eat meat, as the killing of any animal is antithetical to Buddhist beliefs. However, many Buddhists do eat meat as well as fish, and this belief tends to be most closely observed by monks or ascetics rather than by ordinary people today.

Curries originated in India, with the milk and butter from cow raising being included in the recipes. In Southeast Asia, coconut milk was substituted for real milk, with a very different subsequent taste to the curries. Noodles are popular throughout Southeast Asia, and reflect Chinese as well as Indian influence in the spices and methods of preparation.

European food ways also have had their influence in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, for example, Spanish influence is clearly present not only in the languages of the country but in their love of such dishes as *pan de sal* (a type of bread), *kilawin* (marinated raw seafood with chili), *paella* (a seafood, meat and rice stir fry dish), *empanada* (a sweet bread), and a variety of other seasoned meat dishes. Conventional dishes in the Philippines reflect more influence from a blend of Chinese, Spanish, and indigenous Southeast Asian traditions than is found anywhere else in Southeast Asia.

b. Popular meals in Southeast Asia consist of rice, fish, vegetables, fruits, and spices. Curry, "satay" (spiced or marinated meat on a stick that is barbecued), "sour fish soup", noodles, and soy products are popular. Flavorings that are common include ginger, pepper, chili peppers, onions, garlic, soy sauce, fish sauce, fermented fish paste, turmeric, candlenut, lemon grass, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, as well as tamarind and lime (for a sour taste). Coconut milk is often used to bind sharp flavors, while palm sugar is used to balance the spices. Unique combinations of sweet and sour, or hot and sour, hot and sweet, are common in various regions. Fish paste and prawn paste is spicy-sour, and is popularly consumed with green mangoes, fresh fish, or in stews. Fish sauce is used in almost all Southeast Asian curries as well as in various forms of cooking fish and pork. Popular vegetables are sweet potatoes, maize, taro, tapioca, legumes, blossoms, and the leaves of many green plants. Popular fruits are pineapple, coconut, star fruit, jackfruit, papaya, bananas, rambutan, mangosteen, and the somewhat odorous durian ("king of the fruits", according to aficionados). Tea and coffee are abundant throughout the region, although the popular drink with a meal is water.

c. Highland cuisine. Some might say that cuisine in the highlands of Southeast Asia is a non-sequitur. Foods here tend to be blander and less fancy compared to foods that have long characterized lowland civilizations. Typically, meat is boiled in a large vat or roasted.

However, the highlands of Southeast Asia are quite varied in terms of food preparation, and the biggest and most popular events of the year focus on ritual feasts. Ritual feasts often are held by aspiring politicians and individuals who wish to raise their status and prestige in the community. This feasting tradition is not new, but centuries old. Politics formerly revolved around the reputation of individuals who had sponsored larger feasts than their competitors, e.g., they had butchered more animals for a large feast and were thus able to invite more guests. In this way, the guests bestowed them with respect and legitimacy, thus leading to a very unique style of political system wherein authority was tied into food and feeding of one's followers periodically. Most often, the occasion for feasting was determined by the ritual cycle and religious belief system.

What is most important to know about highland feasting systems is that food is essential to any ceremonial or political event. Without the presence of food, and an audience, there is no political or ritual legitimacy. Leaders are expected to use their wealth to feast their followers, and religious rites require sacrificial animals in order to feast the ancestors and spirits. In lowland Southeast Asia, too, marriage ceremonies tend to be very large events where much food is prepared for guests.

d. Invitations are not generally part of Southeast Asian food and culture. Traditionally, one drops in on a house of friends or neighbors or kin, and one receives food without question. In fact, it is an insult to refuse to eat food that is offered (Perhaps one is an enemy and afraid of being poisoned? Or perhaps one is not grateful or approving of the type of food being offered?). At feasts, similarly, invitations are rare. They imply invidious distinctions between people that otherwise work and live together in a community; all should be welcome to eat, regardless of status.

e. In the cities and suburban areas of Southeast Asia today, Western influences in the form of fast-food restaurants are becoming more common. McDonalds, Wendy's, Shakey's Pizza, and Kentucky Fried Chicken are among the more common fast food chains that have penetrated Southeast Asia. Side by side, one finds traditional restaurants, bistros, Indian curry shops, Chinese noodle and dim sum shops, and sidewalk vendors supplying local cuisine. Southeast Asians are income-limited but all gourmets, and the range of food choices are generally embraced rather than resented.

## B. Culture

1. General Influences: Social and economic activities associated with feasting include rice harvesting, an important community event that is celebrated in dance and ritual. Symbols of rice are found in textiles, such as batik in Indonesia. Women generally prepare rice for each meal. The development of wet-rice, or irrigated rice cultivation systems in Southeast Asia, led to the continual development of large-scale civilizations, societies, and hierarchies of nobles, commoners, and dependents.

Similarly, the Spice Trade, focused in eastern Indonesia, eventually led to the European colonization and intervention into Southeast Asia. Spices were in great demand in India and China, as well as Europe.

Rice is the basis of Southeast Asian food, and in many languages a common greeting is "Have you eaten yet?" The verb for "to eat" is often the same as the verb "to eat rice". Rice is used for

fuel oil, rice-paper, alcoholic drinks, tea, all manner of foods, cosmetics, medicines, and magical potions. Typically, a small portion of food is offered to the gods, ancestral spirits, and other beings during ritual sacrifices at major ceremonies or even before common, everyday meals. Food can even have an importance in peace relations between neighboring countries, such as is the case in Thailand and Malaysia. The Muslim Malays raise pigs for the Thai Buddhists, who in turn raise cattle for Malays. Although differentiation in culture and religion exist throughout this region, the cooperative food trading system has helped attain peace and forge alliances between neighboring peoples to the present day.

## 2. Cases:

a. Indonesia: Eastern Indonesia women have to follow specific rules in regards to the rice in the village. For example, they may not enter the rice granary unless they are fully clothed, and they must enter with their right foot forward. They may not enter the granary at times when the rice spirit might be sleeping, and they may not step over a pot of cooked rice.

In Java, central Indonesia, villagers hold a wedding ceremony for the rice goddess, Bak Sri, and her male counterpart, Djarka Sudana, in order to symbolize the reaffirmation of marriage. Each member of a married couple identifies or associates themselves with the appropriate rice spirit. Also, it is common for people to spill a few drops of a beverage onto the ground to appease any thirsty spirits that may be lingering about before people sit down to eat and drink.

In Bali, villagers offer extravagant food offerings to demons that are made from pig fat and other symbolically nasty materials at the hundred-year ceremony restoration and balance, known as Eka Desa Rudra. The rice cultivation system is also interesting here, as it is controlled through the timings of community and water group temples, led by a ritual specialist.

In the Toraja highlands of Kalimantan, Indonesia, huge feasting rituals that involve the slaughter of many cattle are held for the purpose of redrawing social status lines. The specific distribution of meat from slaughtered sacrificial animals depends on one's social standing, inherited lineage, and history of feasting. One can be shamed or honored, and one's status raised or lowered, depending on the serving order, portion size, and section of meat one receives.

b. Philippines - In the highlands of Luzon, Ibaloi peoples are famous for their ritual feasts. One large ritual known as peshit was developed as a 25 stage ritual that each person aspiring to high social status and leadership had to perform in order to achieve maximum authority and legitimacy. This unique system developed originally around the slaughter of pigs, and later became elaborated with the introduction of cattle raising. As more and more wealthy individuals acquired large herds of cattle, the peshit ritual became more attainable. Eventually, it was expected that the highest status leaders in the region would not only complete the 25 stage ritual, each stage of which required a larger and larger number of animals to be slaughtered to feed the people, but to repeat it.

c. Malaysia - Malaysia is a country where there is profound ethnic diversity. The *bumiputra*, or "sons of the soil", is a term that refers to the indigenous Malay people. In Malaysia, to be Malay means to be Muslim today. There are also significant numbers of Chinese, who were imported by the British colonial regime to mine tin, as well as Indians, who were imported to

work on rubber plantations. "Nonya" cooking is popular within Malaysia as a symbolic fusion cuisine that integrates elements of indigenous Malay and imported Chinese cooking styles.

In the Langkawi islands, west of Malaysia, a complex and unique kinship system exists whereby outsiders are "incorporated" into existing kin networks through the consumption of food. It is believed that feeding, or the sharing of food between people, creates kinship by transforming the blood of an individual to that of another individual. Since this food is cooked in the kitchen of the house, the hearth is a central symbol of Langkawi, and Malay, community and social life.

### III. LESSON PLAN

#### A. Day One: Geography

This topic (and the region) may be extremely foreign to the students. It is very important for the students to know the major geography of the region before explaining the different cultural attributes. A map can be used to highlight Southeast Asia's location between India and China, and then the teacher can point out the countries, major cities, islands, seas, and other geographic landmarks. See, for example, the outline of political and cultural geography at [www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/russell/seageog.htm](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/russell/seageog.htm).

#### B. Day Two: Food and Culture Lectures

Go over the material presented above with the class. Visuals will help, and some sources with pictures are given in the References section below.

#### C. Day Three: Critical Thinking.

This section encourages the student to relate this information to his/her own culture and daily life. Place the students into groups of 4-6, and then ask them to ponder the question: "How does food affect our culture?" Have the groups present their findings to the entire class. A possible style of presentation is for the students to act out skits portraying an aspect of how one's culture is affected by food or a food-related celebration.

#### D. Day Four: Cooking.

This is the day where, through the aid of the proper facilities and ingredients, the students get to make their own Southeast Asian food. After the food is prepared, the students can practice eating with their hands on a mat on the floor, sitting in a cross-legged fashion. They can then move on to practicing eating with chopsticks, and eventually with just a spoon and fork. We provide some References below with recipes, and there are also recipes on the various language sites of SEAsite ([www.seasite.niu.edu/](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/)). One game that students can play, as well, is to provide each student with a pair of wooden chopsticks, an empty bottle, and a package of dry roasted peanuts. Give them each a few minutes to learn to hold the chopsticks, and to practice picking up peanuts. Then, as a game, see which student can pick up the most peanuts in a 1 minute period and drop them into the bottle. The winner, or the one who puts the most peanuts into the bottle, should get a prize.

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