



RICE: It's More Than Just a Food

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Although U.S. students usually learn about rice during their study of Japan, the coverage is often quite limited. Typical textbook treatment focuses on rice as food, on rice growing as an occupation, and on terracing as a geographic accommodation. Little mention is made of the intrinsic position of rice in Japanese culture.

Contemporary media coverage of rice as a trade topic also contains serious omissions. Headlines focus on the fact that the average Japanese consumer pays an average of five times more for rice than the average U.S. consumer. Details reveal that the typical Japanese farm is slightly less than three acres, with rice farms averaging 1 1/2 acres. Rice is treated as strictly an economic or consumer topic. The economic conclusion from this kind of analysis seems clear: Japan should lift its ban and import more rice--that is, U.S. produced rice.

However, behind the narrow textbook treatment and economically-driven media conclusions is the concept of rice in its cultural context. This digest examines: 1) rice as a deeply embedded cultural concept, 2) the role of rice in the culture, beyond merely a foodstuff, and 3) aspects of the rice trade issue.

Rice: A Deeply Embedded Cultural Concept

Rice is so important in Japanese society that it has been called the essence of the culture. Even a superficial examination of Japanese culture reveals the complex connection rice has to many of its forms and expressions, in both historical and contemporary settings.

Many believe that the following aspects of Japanese social behavior originate from wet rice cultivation: the notion of *wa* (harmony), consensus-seeking, and the assessment of the context of actions. Some even include the concept of *amae* (feelings of dependency). Historically, wet rice cultivation was a labor-intensive task that could not be accomplished easily. As a result, families pooled their labor. More importantly, they also shared their water resources and irrigation facilities. Typically, irrigation arrangements called for water to run downhill, linking all the surrounding families in their shared destiny of communal resource usage. Further, people lived in houses clustered together and depended heavily upon each other since the rice was usually planted on the same day after several days of watering. This necessitated an emphasis on group interests, the enhancement of skills in group decision-making and the avoidance of friction between families who would be neighbors and workmates for generations. This historic commitment to group harmony, a hallmark of the original culture of rice, echoes today and continues to shape group consciousness. Despite the fact that a small number of people actually grow rice, 124 million people still try to sustain group harmony, as they seek daily accommodation in a relatively confined space.

The Role of Rice in the Culture

The language of a culture provides clues to important concepts and values. This is true in the Japanese culture. The primacy of rice as a diet staple is echoed in the Japanese language. "*Gohan*" is both the word for "cooked rice" as well as "meal." This is also true in other Asian cultures where rice is the main dietary staple. The use of *gohan* in Japanese is extended with prefixes to give us *asagohan* (breakfast), *hirugohan* (lunch), and *bangohan* (dinner). These multiple terms signal that it was almost impossible for most Japanese to think of a meal without rice.

Another linguistic link is the early indigenous name of Japan, *mizu ho no kuni* (the land of the water stalk plant or rice). Early identification, then, encompassed the concept of rice-growing. Interestingly, the name the Japanese have used to identify the United States has been *beikoku* (land of rice), thereby implying abundance.

Historically, rice has many links to various aspects of Japanese culture. For example, the Emperor became a "priest-king" early in Japanese history. Many of his priestly functions under the Shinto religion revolved around rice-growing and included rice products such as *sake* (rice wine) and *mochi* (rice cakes), as well as the actual grain and its stalks. Indeed, the previous Emperor Hirohito, right up to the time when he became seriously ill, tended a rice plot, as had previous emperors, on the Imperial grounds in Tokyo. Further, during the last September of his life, Emperor Hirohito inquired about the weather and actively worried about the crop. Tradition continues as Emperor Akihito blesses the rice crop, and his many coronation ceremonies involving rice and rice products underscore links to the emperor and to Shinto.

Over time, control or guarding of the rice crop became a political function, confirming the importance of rice in society. Indeed, rice signalled wealth and also determined wealth through the use of a "*sho*," a measure of rice. At various times rice was an instrument of trade, functioning as hard currency. Rice measured the wealth of the *daimyo* (lord) and provided payment for *samurai* (warriors).

This cursory survey could be augmented by examples from numerous other aspects of Japanese life ranging from folklore, festivals, and family rituals to the arts and specific rice-based foods. Historically, all parts of the rice plant were fully utilized, with over 70 pounds of stalks being recycled into each tatami mat, bran providing a face scrub, and rice paste being used in bookbinding, as well as a resist-dye technique for fabrics, especially silk for kimonos. Rice is so enmeshed in the culture that while people in the U.S. refer to the man in the moon or see a woman's face, Japanese see a rabbit pounding rice cakes (*mochi*), a reminder of a popular folktale.

Rice is nourishment with numerous cultural and historical nuances that are deeply woven into the fabric of Japanese culture. But what of rice in the modern day diet? Japan is no longer a country where 90% of the population is engaged in rice cultivation. Will rice retain its cultural importance?

Statistics regarding Japanese household consumption of rice provide only part of the picture. Although Food Agency surveys reveal a decline in household consumption, rice continues to be popular in such mainstays of modern life as 24-hour convenience stores and restaurant chains geared towards families. Further, throughout the almost 4,000 7-Eleven stores in Japan, fast food sales figures show rice snacks continuing to outpace bread snacks.

Aspects of the Rice Trade Issue

In the postwar period, rice was linked to politics as a disproportionate amount of power went to farmers, due to imbalanced populations among representative districts. It is currently estimated that some imbalances in favor of farming districts are as high as 3.68 to 1. Therefore, farmers wield great influence in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Rice farmers have used voting power to display displeasure over recent reductions in price subsidies and proposed changes in the rice import policy. In Japan, rice is a controlled commodity, with the government regulating the amount of land used for cultivation and overseeing the distribution, usually through designated stores. Each year the government establishes the *beika*, the price paid for rice.

Today Japan is the world's largest consumer of foreign agricultural products. Yearly agricultural imports total \$30 billion. Increasingly, the term "food security" is used to note Japanese concern over their food dependency. Indeed, 53% of the daily Japanese caloric intake comes from imported foodstuffs. Thus, rice serves as a psychological, if not actual, staple of the Japanese diet. Self-sufficiency in growing rice, therefore, has important emotional as well as material ramifications. This is especially true for those who lived through the privation of the post WWII era. Another factor that is often mentioned is the impact of the *furusato* (hometown). This involves a nostalgic attachment to one's ancestral home, where, typically, rice was or is grown. In line with this, recent polls reveal a concern for the livelihood of Japan's shrinking number of rice farmers.

Liberalization of the Japanese Rice Market

The evaluation of rice's role in a contemporary Japanese context, then, is a difficult one. The potential impact of liberalization on the rice market is equally troublesome to assess. While U.S. farmers hope for a share of the Japanese domestic market, many have pointed out the differences between domestic consumption in the two countries. In recent decades, media advertisements for rice in the U.S. have extolled the virtues of long-grain, fluffy rice that does not stick together. In contrast, Japanese consumers prefer short-grained, sticky rice that will accommodate the demands of *sushi*-making and other aspects of Japanese cuisine. Although some sticky rice is grown in the U.S., notably Kokuho Rose, it is questionable whether many of the estimated 11,000 U.S. rice growers will switch to growing short-grained rice. The growing of rice varieties such as Kokuho Rose entail greater risks since they typically require 160 days to mature, versus 130 for other rice crops.

Some have countered that changes in the rice policy might actually pave the way for Japan's approximately 500,000 rice farmers to fulfill increasing U.S. demands for glutinous, short-grained rice. Still others have argued that if restrictions are lifted,

Japan should buy rice from Southeast Asia, where rice is cheaper and contains fewer farm chemicals. Such purchases would distribute Japan's wealth and perhaps reap goodwill among its neighbors.

Currently, Japan is experiencing *gai-atsu* (foreign pressure) to lift the ban on the importation of rice, especially at the Uruguay Round of multilateral negotiations under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Some proposals call for the lifting of import restrictions to be matched by a 700% tariff that would be reduced by 15%, over six years.

In an interesting twist of fate, the issue was recently forced by a Japanese company, Sushi Boy, Inc. of Osaka. In late 1992, this firm made plans to manufacture, freeze, and export *sushi* from Escondido, California to the company's 44 shops in Japan. Despite shipping and other costs, the firm will cut the price nearly in half, since California rice and automation will be used. This immediately raised the issue of whether *sushi* is a fish product and therefore legal to import, or a rice product and therefore banned. Following protracted discussions, and weighing of the product to determine the component parts, fish and rice, the imports were approved. The firm's next challenge, however, is to convince Japanese consumers to eat this novel version of a time-honored dish. Will psychological factors play a role in the decision-making? Will savvy Japanese consumers opt for the cheaper version? Whatever the outcome, the rice issue will continue to remain in the headlines.

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