

THE GOLDEN RICE FIELDS OF OWARABI

Local farmers and volunteers are working together to preserve the iconic rice terraces of Owarabi in Yamanobe, Yamagata Prefecture, which in autumn turn a magnificent, *kogane-iro* gold.

SASAKI TAKASHI

TOHOKU is a rice-growing area representative of Japan. Vast plains covered in fields spread across the countryside, and the mountainous areas are dotted with terraced rice paddies on reclaimed slopes. They shine green in the spring when the rice is planted, and turn a golden color in the fall harvest season. *Kogane-iro* is the Japanese word describing a golden color (*iro* means color). Another word for this golden color is *yamabuki-iro*, which is derived from the reddish yellow color of the *kerria marigold* (*yamabuki*) bushes that blossom all over Japan in spring. For example, in the Edo period (1603-1867), the oval gold coins *oban*¹ and *koban*² were described as being “yamabuki-iro.”

Rice is cultivated throughout Japan, and the

full-grown rice plants shining in the autumn sun are gratefully and joyfully associated with the phrase “*kogane-iro*.” During harvest, the rice paddies stretching across the plains appear as a *kogane-iro*-colored carpet, and the terraced rice paddies on the mountains move like golden waves in the wind.

The terraced rice paddies in Owarabi in Yamanobe, Yamagata Prefecture, take on their beautiful golden color against the green backdrop of the surrounding mountains. The paddies are known for their *kuigake*, rows of piled rice plants drying in the sun along the ridges during the fall harvest.

“The *kogane-iro* rice panicles undulating slowly in the wind while the reaped rice plants are piled up in layers on the terraced rice paddies is a view that epitomizes how fruitful the fall is in Japan,” says

Inamura Kazuyuki, a representative of Group Nofunokai (group of farmers), an association of volunteers committed to the reconstruction of the terraced rice paddies and revitalization of the local community. In winter, the surface of the land is entirely covered with pure white snow. In spring, the water-filled terraced rice paddies, ready for the planting of rice, reflect the blue sky and white clouds like a mirror. In summer, the rice grows as the greenery on the mountains thickens. And, in the fall, the rice plants take on their kogane-iro color. The terraced rice paddies please the eye in every season. Nevertheless, it is fall that impresses Inamura the most, since this is when the panicles bow down under the weight of the full-grown grains of rice, indicating that they are ready for harvest.

The Owarabi rice terraces date back to the early Edo period, but have suffered from a decrease in the number of farmers in recent years. With Inamura's concern growing, he established Group Nofunokai in 2011 and brings in volunteers to preserve the terraced rice paddies together with the local farmers.

The kogane-iro colored rice plants grow abundantly right to the top of the terraced fields, where golden rows of kuigake piled along the ridges shimmer against the green backdrop of the mountains. Inamura works together with likeminded people to preserve the outstanding beauty of Owarabi. 

i *Oban*: large-sized old Japanese gold coin
ii *Koban*: small-sized old Japanese gold coin