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History and Culture Fostered by Rice

RICE has played a variety of roles over the course of Japanese history. We spoke to Sato Yo-ichiro, a professor in the Faculty of Letters at Kyoto Prefectural University and President of the Society of Japanese Food Studies, about Japan's history and culture of rice.

When did rice cultivation begin in Japan?

Rice cultivation is thought to have started in the Yangtze River Delta in China about 10,000 years ago and then spread to Japan through mainland China or the Korean peninsula, although the timing for this remains quite uncertain. Rice cultivation can broadly be divided into dry field and paddy cultivation, and the paddy cultivation that is most common in Japan today is thought to have started in northern Kyushu about 3,000 years ago (10th century BCE). Paddy cultivation then spread to the Kinki region about 300 years later (7th century BCE) and then to the far north of the Tohoku region about 600 years after it began (4th century BCE). Grains like millet and buckwheat were also grown on a limited scale in fields at the time, but paddy rice cultivation had a higher yield, which is thought to have been the reason for the spread of rice. Thus, Japan gradually changed from being a hunter society where people caught animals like wild boar, deer, fish, and shellfish and collected fruits and nuts, to an agricultural society where people settled permanently and grew rice communally.

How did rice cultivation continue to spread after that?

From the 4th through the 6th centuries CE, as

Japan was taking form as a country, enormous burial mounds were constructed in great numbers in the Kinki region. You could say that burial mound construction was a large-scale national project. It required colossal labor and food. This is why the leaders of that time gathered a labor force, cultivated new land and then expanded the paddy fields. Rice was an energy source for the many workers.

Starting in the early 8th century, the state began distributing land to people and collected rice grown on that land as tax. When land eventually started becoming scarce, the state recognized private ownership of land that a person had cultivated themselves in an effort to motivate farmers. This “privatization” of land development allowed powerful aristocratic families and local ruling families to expand the paddy fields. In the Sengoku (Warring States) period (late 15th century-early 17th century), rice was a military supply supporting wars. In this way, the possession of highly productive land came to equate to having economic, military, and political power. This didn't fundamentally change after that, but in fact persisted until the Edo period (1603-1867).

What role did rice play in the Edo period?

In the Edo period, the Tokugawa shogunate created a system where rice was at the center of the economy. The shogunate ranked the domains governing different parts of the country by rice harvesting capacity. The largest domain was Kaga Domain, which is plainly expressed in the fact that it was referred to as the “Kaga million *koku*” (*koku*

was a unit of volume to measure rice and other dry goods). Rice harvesting capacity was directly translated into a domain lord's rank. The domains consolidated the rice collected as tax in Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Osaka, encashed it, and purchased necessary goods. Rice really was the foundation of the economy. Meanwhile, as large quantities of rice started circulating among the urban residents of Edo, Osaka, and other cities, rice did become a staple food, but it also appears that only those with economic strength were able to eat enough rice in the farm villages, since most farmers had to render their rice as annual tax. The desire to eat one's fill of milled rice was something that remained up until Japan's economic growth that followed the Second World War. Perhaps it is rare nowadays, but parents used to scold their children for being "mottainai" (wasteful) if they left even a few grains of rice in their bowls.

What examples of Japanese culture are there that have to do with rice?

Rice is an ingredient in foods such as *mochi* rice cakes, confectionery, and seasonings such as miso and vinegar. Festivals celebrating the rice harvest are held across the country every fall. Likewise, during the rice planting in spring, there are songs and dances praying for a bountiful harvest. Rice from the year's first harvest as well as *mochi* and sake made from rice are offered to the gods at Shinto shrines. Annual events also always include offerings of food and drink with rice connections. For example, families eat *zoni* soup containing *mochi* rice cakes at New Year and sake is drunk together with *osechi*, the traditional New Year's food. "Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese" was inscribed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Humanity in 2013, and this intimate connection between annual events for celebration and Japanese food was one of the motivations for this decision.

Moreover, the basic style of Japanese food is rice and *ichi-ju san-sai*, which means a combination of soup with three kinds of small dishes. Western food has become common in Japan since the Meiji period (1868-1912) and meat has been added as an ingredient, but the style of eating "rice, small dishes, and a soup like miso soup" hasn't changed much. Many dishes that Japanese people enjoy, like sushi, curry, and *gyudon* beef bowl, are eaten together with rice.

What meaning do you think the rice culture fostered in Japan until now will have for the future?

I think there are few countries in the world where rice has influenced such a broad range of aspects, including the economy, society, and culture as much as it has in Japan. Rice is and will remain a valuable food for the Japanese, so I believe the rice-related cultural tradition should continue to be handed down through the generations. We're also seeing increasingly labor-saving developments through the introduction of agricultural machines, but rice cultivation used to be done by many people working together in the farm villages. That fostered a communal sense of mutual assistance. Some say Japan is a suitable place to cultivate rice, but I doubt it. Whether you have a poor or good crop, it highly depends on the natural environment. So people had a sense of awe and reverence, and tried to live together with nature, which I think is the basis of the Japanese lifestyle. I believe what we today call the sustainable society was already present in Japan a long time ago when everybody worked together, ate what grew in that area, and lived lives that valued their surrounding environment. As the world is aiming to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), I think that kind of lifestyle can be a helpful reference for Japan and the world in the future. 🍚

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
