

Component 2, Part 5

Centripetal Forces in Japan: Rice Cultivation

Rice is the final centripetal force in this lesson. According to legend, Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, gave her grandson rice grown in Heaven so that he could turn the Japanese islands into productive farmland. Rice grains came to represent the peaceful soul of the Sun goddess (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2004) ([Figure 19](#)).



Figure 19: Mature rice ready for harvest signifies seasonal change and festivals. (Source: Miyoko Matsuoka)

Historically, growing rice involved community effort. The construction of irrigation ditches, management of water levels, flood control, soil conservation, as well as planting and harvesting, all required cooperation ([Figure 20](#)). The rice itself became an essential dish at mealtimes, although in pre-modern Japan upper classes ate rice and peasants ate mostly millet and barley. The celebration of agricultural events involves consumption of *sake* (rice wine) and rice cakes.



Figure 20: Space is not wasted in Japan; even a small rice paddy raises the water table, helps to control runoff, and produces the nation's historic staple food. (Source: Alice Tym)

Artists featured rice paddies and farmers in the fields. The famous wood block prints, *ukiyo-e*, of Hiroshige and Hokusai depict scenes of terraced fields and flooded paddies. The scenery of

Japan became the art of Japan. Food brought the Japanese together in the field and at the table.

A widely-shared belief among the Japanese is that foreign rice is inferior to domestic rice. The majority of Japanese consumers oppose genetically modified, foreign rice. (Moore, 2004). The politics of Japanese protectionism extends to rice cultivation. This, too, has been a centripetal force, because it unifies a segment of the populace against imported rice and encourages local production.



Figure 21: A substantial amount of rural farm land is still devoted to rice cultivation. (Source: Alice Tym)

In an era of increasingly globalized economies, Japan is nearly 100 percent self-sufficient in rice, despite domestic production prices ten times higher than foreign prices. Many Japanese view rice production as multifunctional. Terraced paddies prevent flooding and soil erosion. Paddies restore underground reservoirs which provide drinking water (Figure 21). Rice cultivation still keeps a few rural communities viable. While per capita rice consumption has steadily decreased since World War II, and many young people prefer other foods, the environmental significance of rice is now more important than the economic significance (Moore, 2004). For additional information on Japanese rice production and consumption visit the following website: www.fao.org/rice2004/en/p8.htm. For information on Japanese subsidized rice visit www.unctad.org/infocomm/anglais/rice/ecopolicies.htm.

Note To Teacher

Students should compare the strict division between US farmland and urban areas with the intertwined urban and rural landscapes of Japan where every available space is put into production. The Japanese often cultivate less than an acre not just for garden crops, but also for rice. The average farm size in the United States is 446 acres; the average Japanese farm is only about 2.18 ha or 5.38 acres. Good comparative Japan-US agricultural economic material maybe found at: www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Japan/basicinformation.htm. A Web site showing US farm size by state

is http://www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/Farms_and_Land_in_Farms/fncht6.asp. Students may compare the 3,780 acre average farm in Wyoming to the relatively small farms in Japan. Students should also be encouraged to think of a single crop representative of the entire US. While we may grow corn and soybeans in the Midwest, grapes in California, oranges in Florida, and wheat in the Dakotas and Kansas, we do not have a single, unifying crop and landscape like the rice and rice paddies of Japan. Students interested in Japanese cuisine should sample these websites: <http://www.bento.com/tf-recp.html> and <http://japanesefood.about.com/> (Figure 22).



Figure 22: A variety of foods and colors are part of the art of Japanese dining. Historically, rice has been the staple both in culture and diet. (Source: Alice Tym)

References

- Moore, Richard, "The Japan Rice Paradox," *Education About Asia*, Volume 9, Number 3, Winter 2004
- Ohnuki-tierney, Emiko, "Rice As Self," *Education About Asia*, Volume 9, Number 3, Winter 2004