



You are what you eat

Can a country as modern as Japan cling onto a culture as ancient as rice?

IN EARLY autumn a pilgrimage of sorts takes place in Japan. People ride the bullet train from Tokyo, pass through a long tunnel in the mountains of western Japan, and emerge in Niigata, one of the richest rice-growing regions in the country. They travel to see the harvest, which takes place as the leaves on the trees are turning red and the chestnuts start to fall. But it is not as bucolic as it could be, because Japan's love of rice is matched only by its attachment to concrete. On one mountain, where you look out over a breathtaking patchwork of ripe paddy fields, an observation tower looms over the valley like Godzilla.

The Japanese can see through such eyesores, however, because the rice fields hold an enduring fascination. For many, they represent a timeless part of Japan's landscape, history and culture in a country that has transformed itself, not just in the 65 years since the second world war, but in the century and a half since it ended its self-imposed isolation from the world.

Even on a trip to rural Japan, you rarely lose sight of the speed of that change. At a roadside restaurant, there are pictures of the steam train that used to pass by when the proprietress was a young lady. Now there is a bullet train, with seats that swivel perpendicular to the window, so both passengers can look out on the landscape. In some villages, there are still coin-operated threshing machines, next to neon coffee-vending machines.

But scratch the surface anywhere in Japan and it is not hard to find traces of the rural past, even in Tokyo. Bare-bottomed men carry *o-mikoshi*, portable shrines, through the back streets of the capital to give thanks for the harvest—although these days, it is a

salary they are grateful for. And the fashion-conscious have antenna attuned to the changing seasons: on one day in autumn, the bejewelled high heels of summer were all gone, as if by magic. The women had changed into boots.

This awareness of time is closely associated with a rice-growing calendar that has helped to shape Japan's identity since paddy fields were first dug from the landscape about 2,400 years ago. The Japanese take great pride in the quality, taste and stickiness of their rice. After each harvest, each farmer's crop is checked by gruff inspectors with magnifying glasses screwed to their eyes. They shake 1,000 grains of rice into a saucer (the number that fit on the bottom),

and count each imperfect one. Anything below grade two is considered unfit for humans—and the price plummets accordingly.

But the obsession goes deeper yet, as if in the grains of polished rice the Japanese see a reflection of themselves and of their blemishes. Recently, that image has been more troubling than uplifting. Among the many rice-growing nations of Asia, there is none so rich, efficient and modern as Japan. Among grains, few are so steeped in tradition and mystique as rice. Despite a rush to modernity, Japan still clings to its ancient rice culture as if losing it would destroy its soul. Yet its farmers, the keepers of the grain, are literally dying out. Almost half of them are over 65. If they take rice's rich heritage to the grave, what will that do to Japan? ▶▶

Humility is a virtue the Japanese hold dear: "The heavier the head of rice, the deeper it bows."

The journey through the Alps to Niigata takes you to a land in winter that seems as far away from the hot and swampy business of rice farming as you can imagine. It is “Snow Country”, a place blasted by Siberian winds, whose desolation was best described by the Nobel-prize winning writer, Yasunari Kawabata, in a novel of that name. The winds bring snow over the Sea of Japan in winter that piles up so high children toboggan out of their upstairs windows. In the houses, elderly people huddle around electric *kotatsu*, as the local stoves are called.

Snow Country for old men

The village of Tochikubo sits half way up a mountain. It is, at first glance, a prosperous-looking place; there are new cars, and an attractive school built after an earthquake damaged the old wooden one five years ago. It has a big playground, which the children make good use of, peddling around on monocycles and doing cartwheels. But there is a disconcerting fact about the school. A few decades ago, there were 120 pupils. Now there are only 11, of such a variety of ages that they need seven teachers.

The shortage of children is symptomatic of a chronic affliction: young families have abandoned places like Tochikubo, unable to make a living. The hollowing out of such communities is a source of deep anxiety in Japan. Tochikubo is on the brink of *genkai shuraku*, the ageing precipice when more than half of the community are over 65. It is not quite there yet (40% are over 65), but according to the OECD, 18,775 such communities are expected to be abandoned over the next decade. Will Tochikubo be one of them?

In one of the village's farmhouses, 101-year-old Sadayoshi Fueki, the oldest man in the community, counts on his gnarled fingers the number of households that have moved out in the last decade. Twenty five. He speaks sadly of the absence of children. It feels like the time in the second world war when all the men of fighting age were shipped out.

What is worse, no one has a clue what to do about it. Ask Akira Fueki, president of the local farming co-operative, how to reverse the abandonment of rural areas, and he pauses for a long time before giving an answer. “It’s a tough life,” he says. “Even those who have grown up in the village don’t want their children to work in the rice fields. My father used to push me to work when I was a child but it’s a harsh memory. You should only work in the fields if you are willing to do so and it’s only when people are over 50 that they are willing.”

It is not just the physical effort that is discouraging. The economics are too. In Tochikubo, each of 60 households owns about one hectare. To avoid over-production, the government pays them to leave about a third fallow, which means they produce, on average, 40 60kg (132lb) sacks per hectare (2.5 acres). A sack sells for about 20,000 yen (\$230). That amounts to a yearly income of only about 800,000 yen, which barely covers the cost of machinery.



The glorious days for farmers are long gone

Yet this rice is among Japan's best—the snow, it is said, gives the local rice, known as *minami uonoma*, a particular purity. It is surrounded by the stillness of snow that the most productive rice seeds are kept through the winter months in an outside storehouse. The building is so closely associated with the nurturing of new life that mothers traditionally went there to give birth.

The melting of this snow in early spring heralds the start of the planting season that has done so much to shape Japanese culture. According to mythology, rice was intimately associated with the creation of Japan. That is because the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, gave grains of rice to one of her grandsons, the mythical first emperor Jimmu. His task was to turn Japan into a land of rice. Legend has it that Emperor Akihito, who reigns today, is Jimmu's 125th direct descendent. That makes him Japan's rice farmer-in-chief, and each year he harvests a small crop to share with the gods. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, a Japanese anthropologist and authority on its rice, notes how most countries' creation myths begin with the birth of the universe. Japan's are more down to earth, and reflected in its businesslike approach to life today: “It was about the transformation of a wilderness into a land of abundant rice at the command of the Sun Goddess, whose descendants, the emperors, rule the country by officiating at rice rituals.”

As these rituals suggests, the planting of rice has an intimate bearing on Japan's indigenous religion, Shintoism. The religion makes a virtue of the idea of subordination of self interest to the well-being of the group. Scholars believe this may stem from the traditional labour-intensity of rice cultivation, in which all members of the village were required to help sow, weed and harvest, and water had to be shared out with scrupulous fairness (even today, two-thirds of Japan's water goes to its paddies).

Those who did not co-operate risked being shunned, in a chilling village practice known as *murahachibu*; it could lead to ostracisation for a farmer and his descendants. There may be traces of this in the striking conformity that visitors to Japan notice today. A well-known Japanese expression “The nail that sticks up will be hammered down” runs through religion and culture and may reflect attitudes established in the paddies.

As well as customs and morals, rice helped to shape history.

For much of the middle ages and beyond it was the main unit of taxation. The farmers who produced it were long considered valuable members of society, above merchants in the rigid hierarchy, although below warriors. But if they ate rice, they often had to mix it with millet to make it go further. If the harvest was poor, they sacrificed their own needs to give rice to the taxman.

That meant that rice was a luxury good, served in the elegant rice bowls of the warlords and samurai at the cost of back-breaking work in the fields. But the feudal lords went a stage further. They made something implicitly noble—and quintessentially Japanese—about rice, that began to be reflected in art, aesthetics, even fashion. Rich women wore representations of rice woven into their 17th-century kimonos.

It was during the Edo era, from about 1600 to 1870, a period of ►►

self-imposed isolation in Japanese history, that the rice culture flourished most vividly. Trade along the roads to Edo, now Tokyo, was vigorous. Edo and Osaka hosted rice-futures markets. The area around Tochikubo, now known as Niigata, was one of the most populated parts of Japan because of the quality of its crop.

At that time, *Ukiyo-e*, or woodblock prints, were in fashion. Ms Ohnuki-Tierney notes that the prints depict the rice paddies in beautiful detail. They represent an unchanging “primordial Japanese landscape,” she says. The people in the foreground travelling to and from Edo are far more transitory.

Over the centuries, rice became so embedded in Japanese culture that it helped to reinforce a sense of national identity. In the seventh century, the emperor Tenmu commissioned the first myth histories of Japan, the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, to explain national origins. As in the story of the sun goddess’s grandson, they are replete with rice. They served to reaffirm Japanese identity just as China was influencing it with a writing system and new culture.

But the myths skirted over an awkward historical fact. Rice did not come to Japan from heaven. It came from China and reached Japan via what is now the Korean Peninsula in about 400 BC, accompanied by lusty Korean farmers who probably went on to populate Japan, outbreeding the indigenous Jomon hunter-gatherers. Even today, the Japanese are reluctant to acknowledge they may have Korean roots.

As Japan entered the modern era, rice once again burnished Japan with a sense of itself. The Edo period ended with Commodore Perry’s Black Ships parked off eastern Japan, threatening to blast open its borders with American cannons. Sumo wrestlers were made to carry heavy sacks of rice to show the Americans their strength.

But the country was not strong enough compared with the strapping Americans. So Japan set to feeding up its people. Women were lured to factory work by the promise of three bowls of rice a day. Soldiers in the second world war were given bento boxes of rice with a plum in the middle to symbolise the rising sun.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that everyone had as much rice as they wanted, and at that stage, farmers recall, the landscape literally changed. Bulldozers made rice paddies squarer and flatter, which let farmers use combine harvesters, increasing productivity. Artificial fertilizers improved yields, as did pesticides.

These were glorious times for farmers, whose mission was to return Japan to rice self-sufficiency. It coincided with Japan’s industrial renaissance, and with a rising demand for labour in factories that were beginning to lead the world in production of high-tech goods. Yukie Kuwabara, who travels around the rice fields she has farmed for the past 50 years on a motorised scooter, recalls how her sons left Tochikubo to work as “salarymen”. That helped generate cash, which was then scarce in the village, to buy machinery for the family farm.

But it all came at a cost, she laments. The more the young left the villages, the more they were gripped by the fever of modernisation. Even as rice crops grew, Japanese people were eating less rice. They turned increasingly to bread and meat, much of it imported. Today each Japanese consumes, on average, about 60kgs of rice a year, roughly half the amount of the early 1960s. Self-sufficiency in rice quickly turned to surplus, and from the 1970s onwards the government has paid people not to produce. In a country that had always yearned for more rice, farmers suddenly felt, like their crops, that they were superfluous.

Heart of rice

Not disdained, however. Tetsuhiro Yamaguchi is a young restaurateur in Tokyo who believes that the “spirit of rice” is part of the Japanese DNA. He is doing his best to keep it alive. His restaurant, *Kororomae* (Heart of Rice), has more than ten types of rice on the menu, which bubble on his stove in clay cooking pots. He lists the farms from which each brand comes.

Like wine-tasting, he makes the rice-eating experience a touch

theatrical. In his darkened restaurant, the rice sits in the pots it has been cooked in. It is surrounded by small earthenware dishes of sashimi. He kneels and lifts the lids. The steam wafts across the table. The polished rice gleams, pearl-like. “Rice is the backdrop, like the stage in a theatre. It needs stars and characters—that is where the sashimi comes in,” he murmurs.

He is far from being the only Japanese to turn lyrical over rice. The whiteness is like the soul, people say; it should not even be stained with soy sauce. Its relationship with fish reflects a shared provenance: water. Rice reflects the concept of harmony and communality that the Japanese hold so dear. It is the only dish that is shared from a common bowl. A famous haiku written about rice serves as a metaphor for humility, a virtue the Japanese hold dear: “The heavier the head of rice, the deeper it bows.”

For all the lyricism, many Japanese are also disturbingly nationalistic over the foodstuff. They ignore the fact that rice, in various forms, is eaten by three billion people across Asia, and that the reverence for it is shared by many cultures. Mr Yamaguchi would never serve foreign rice. Why not? “Japanese bodies are made from rice,” he says. “The Japanese people should only eat rice grown in Japan.”

Such perceptions hold sway at the national level, and governments have done little to change them. That helps explain the extraordinary protectionism in Japanese agriculture. The Japanese may grumble at how taxes are used to support farmers. But it is not just farmers who resist free trade. In polls, ordinary people say they are opposed to imports, even if prices would drop. The irony is that if the government did not protect farmers so assiduously, lower prices might encourage people to eat more rice.



Soldiers in the war were given bento boxes of rice with a plum in the middle to symbolise the rising sun

But Japanese agriculture is paralysed, the farmers unable to think clearly, as if fearing that if market forces were unleashed, paddies would be forever lost, changing both the landscape and the traditional orderliness of the Japanese psyche. It need not be like that. Hearteningly, in villages such as Tochikubo a small flame of private enterprise is being lit. On a Sunday morning in October, 35 students, environmentalists and businessmen, as well as a couple of foreigners, gathered in Tochikubo with sickles in hand to harvest something very rare in Japan: an organic rice field. They cut the stalks, bound them with straw, and hung them on iron poles to dry in the autumn sun. Then, adopting the age-old thriftiness common to farmers worldwide, they gleaned every inch of the paddy for the last grains.

It could all have been done much more quickly by combine harvester. And the villagers were bemused to see city folk trying to twist rice into sheaves as if they were 18th-century peasants. But there was a sense of purpose to the shared endeavour, and the farmers sold their rice to the visitors for good prices—as well as charging them for the privilege of toiling.

“It’s rare to find people in their sixties and seventies trying to be entrepreneurs. But there’s only us left,” said Mr Fueki, the co-operative president. That is the sort of spirit rice-growing needs and there are faint signs of it emerging in parcels of land across Japan. Farmers say that using their initiative lets them bring enthusiasm back to a job that is in danger of becoming as depressingly obsolete as Soviet-style collective farming. If farmers—for so long part of the Japanese bone marrow—recover some self-esteem, perhaps Japan might too. ■