

The Story of Rice

As the morning and evening winds blow cooler, and the sun gradually sets earlier, it starts to feel like autumn. Although the rice crops are said to ripen in the autumn, in recent years it seems that in many districts rice harvest is beginning as early as July. This month, we would like to introduce what is known as the staple food of the Japanese people, 'rice'.

○ When did rice cultivation begin in Japan?

It is said that rice cultivation started on the continent of China and passed through the Korean peninsula around 3000 years ago before arriving in northern parts of Kyushu, Japan. Subsequently it spread all over Japan, and what had once been a primarily hunter-gatherer society, became a cooperative, agricultural society, as rice became the focus of the peoples' livelihood.

○ So how did it expand after that?

From the 4th to 6th century, due to the wide-scale construction of large 'Kofun' burial mounds, an increase in manpower and food became a necessity. For that reason, influential leaders of



the time gathered many laborers and began to cultivate new land into water-filled paddy fields to farm rice. Later, in the early 8th century, rice was collected as a form of tax, and so those with enough land to produce large amounts of rice gained economic, militaristic, and political power.

○ The role of rice during the Edo Period

The Tokugawa Shogunate implemented a system that placed rice at the center of the economy. The quantity of rice cultivated became connected to the rank of the Daimyo. However, since farmers in the rural agricultural areas still had to use rice as tax, those without strong economic influence were unable to eat rice as often as others. This longing to have a belly full of white rice lasted until the economic development of Japan following the Second World War.



○ Japan's food culture

The rice that is planted in spring and harvested in autumn, is offered to the gods at shrines in the form of mochi or sake. At the new year, while eating a soup containing mochi, people drink Japanese sake. The usual style of Japanese food is a combination of three dishes, consisting of rice, a soup, and a meat dish, and despite the present increase in popularity of multinational foods, the eating style of 'rice, soup and meat' remains.

Additionally, rice has played a significant part in Japan's economy, society, and culture for a long-time, and so for Japanese people it has a special existence. Although it is true that the yearly consumption of rice is falling, after reviewing Japan's food culture, why not have a freshly cooked, steaming bowl of rice this evening.



If you have any questions, opinions, or requests about this piece, please contact the Miyazaki International Exchange Association.

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