



# RICE AS SELF

## JAPANESE IDENTITIES THROUGH TIME

By Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney



**Utagawa Hiroshige**  
Japanese, 1797–1858  
Yoshitsune's Cherry Tree and the Shrine to Noriyori at  
Ishiyakushi, no. 45 from the series *Pictures of the Famous Places*  
on the Fifty-three Stations  
(Vertical Tokaido)  
1855  
Color woodcut  
Evehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin Madison,  
Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.1108

Food is a rage in the United States and innumerable publications on food, academic and general, are available. While one seldom hears about the cultural meaning of staple food, it does not take much to notice the profound symbolic meanings assigned to staple food everywhere. Among Euro-American Christians, for example, bread is a symbolic representation of the body of Christ. It represents food in general, as in the expressions “breadline” and “breadwinner.” It is the only shared food passed around the table, and it thus often strengthens the human/kinship relations of the individuals at the table.

An effort to make a distinction between “we” vs. “they”—“food fight”—is often expressed through “our” vs. “their” staple food. “Rice-eating Asians vs. bread-eating Europeans” is a familiar expression of difference between the Asians and the Europeans. French vs. German vs. Italian bread; oil vs. butter distinction running east and west across France, with Belgians belonging to the butter side—or sorghum of the Pende contrasted with maize of the Mbuun in nineteenth century central Africa. In Asia, wheat-eating northern Indians vs. rice-eating south Indians, or, rice-growing east India vs. millet-growing west India.

Roughly one third of the world population in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa rely on rice as exclusive staple food. Yet, some rely far more on the quantitative value of rice than others, among whom, like the Japanese, the quantity of intake is rapidly decreasing. Some, like the Thai, produce rice more for export than for domestic consumption. Yet, among all rice-eating Asians, the symbolic/religious importance of rice is amply expressed in its ubiquitous presence in major festivals and rituals—rice planting rituals, harvest rituals, weddings, etc.

In this article, I choose rice in Japan, in historical perspective, as an example of how a staple food is indeed a powerful and evocative symbol of the collective self of a people.<sup>1</sup> In the conclusion, I briefly touch on some comparative aspects.

### RICE AS THE JAPANESE SELF

Wet-rice agriculture was introduced from somewhere in Asia to Japan around 400 BCE,<sup>2</sup> and gradually supplanted the previous hunting-gathering subsistence economy which began with the first occupation of the archipelago around 200,000 BCE. Wet-rice agriculture provided the economic foundation for the Yamato state and what later became the imperial family. The first emperor was a farmer qua shaman who had an exceptional ability to communicate with the deities to secure a good rice harvest. For this reason, the Japanese imperial rituals are almost all about rice—planting to harvesting rituals. Rice and rice farming began as an upper class affair, and remained so even with the so-called caste system during the Edo period in which the two on top were warriors (*shi*), who were rice consumers without being rice producers, and farmers (*nō*).

Japan’s written history starts with the appropriation of imported rice and rice agriculture as their own. The eighth century myth-histories of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki*—the first written documents of Japan—were commissioned by the Tenmu Emperor who sought to establish a Japanese identity distinct from that of Tang China whose influence was engulfing Japan. These myth-histories are replete with references to rice as deities. In one version in the

*Kojiki*, the Sun Goddess (Amaterasu) is the mother of a grain soul whose name bears reference to rice stalks. The legendary Jinmu Emperor, the so-called “first” emperor, is the son of the grain soul or the grandson of the Sun Goddess, who sends him to rule the earth. At the time of his descent, the Sun Goddess gives her grandson the original rice grains that she has grown in two fields in Heaven (Takamagahara) from the seeds of various types of grains given to her by the Deity in charge of food (Ukemochi no Kami). The grandson’s mission was to transform the Japanese archipelago from a wilderness into a land of succulent ears of rice (*mizuho*) nurtured by the rays of the Sun Goddess.

In other words, the rice grain embodies the Japanese deity. Most deities have dual qualities and powers. The Deity of the Rice Paddy has only the *nigimitama* or peaceful soul, and, drought or flood, which destroys rice paddies, is considered an act of the *Mizu no Kami* (Water Deity) rather than an expression of the *aramitama* (violent spirit) of the Deity of the Rice Paddy. Thus, rice grain represents the peaceful soul of the deity.

Since human lives wane unless the positive principle replenishes their energies, humans and their communities must rejuvenate themselves by harnessing the positive power of the deities (*nigimitama*). This can be accomplished by performing rituals during which humans harness divine power. Or, they can do so by eating rice; the Japanese internalize the divine power which then becomes part of the human body and its growth. I therefore see that rice, soul, deity, and the *nigimitama* (peaceful/positive power of the deity) are all symbolic equivalents.

Instead of the creation of a universe, as in other peoples’ origin myths, this version is 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. Appropriating rice, a foreign food, as the Japanese rice, grown by Japanese deities, the myth establishes a symbolic equation between “Japanese” rice and their deities, and rice paddies and Japanese land.

Given this symbolic equation, rice and rice products are the single most important food to share—an act known as commensality—between humans and deities, on the one hand, and among humans, on the other. During agricultural rituals for farmers and during the nationwide New Year’s celebration, rice wine is consumed and rice cakes are offered to the deities and then shared among humans. Also, in the daily lives of the Japanese, rice and rice products play a crucial role in commensal activities, as an offering to the family ancestral alcove to share with one’s ancestors and as the only shared food at meals, served usually by the female head of the household, while other dishes are placed in individual containers. Rice stands for “we,” i.e., whatever social group one belongs to, as in a common expression, “to eat from the same rice-cooking pan,” which connotes a strong sense of fellowship arising from sharing meals. By contrast, such expressions as “to eat cold rice (rice is usually served hot)” and “to eat someone else’s rice” refer to the opposite situation.

*Sake* (rice wine) is the most important item of commensality, especially among men, with the basic rule that one never pours sake for oneself. People take turns pouring sake into one another’s cups in a never-ending series. The phrase “drinking alone” (*hitorizake*) expresses that there is nothing lonelier than having to pour one’s own sake—an act portraying a lone individual on the verge of becoming a non-person, socially, that is.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), the power of a feudal lord was expressed through the image of golden ears of rice stretching across the lord’s domain. In rural Japan even today, the “ancestral land” is a spatial symbol of family. If rice is a symbol of “we” through the act of commensality, rice paddies are its spatial equivalent, symbolizing the social group, be it family, the local community, or the nation at large.

Although the idealization of rice paddies as countryside qua “nature” by intellectuals and artists began earlier, we see its systematic development during the late Edo period when Edo



**Katsushika Hokusai**

Japanese, 1760–1849

Peasants and Travelers in an Autumn Landscape; Illustration of a Verse by Emperor Tenchi, no. 1 from the series *The Hyakunin*

*Isshu as Explained by an Old Nurse*

1835-1836

Color woodcut

Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin Madison,

Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.2426

*The legendary Jinmu Emperor, the so-called “first” emperor, is the son of the grain soul or the grandson of the Sun Goddess, who sends him to rule the earth. At the time of his descent, the Sun Goddess gives her grandson the original rice grains that she has grown in two fields in Heaven . . .*



**Utagawa Hiroshige**

Japanese, 1797–1858

Fuji on the Left near Yoshiwara, no. 15 from the series *Fifty-three*

*Stations of the Tokaido* (Marusei or Reisho Tokaido)

ca. 1850

Color woodcut

Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin Madison,

Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.994

(Tokyo) became the urban center. Nowhere is the construction of the countryside more vividly depicted than in the woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) of the time. A most common motif of prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige relates to rice and rice agriculture: rice farmers at work, sheaves of harvested rice, seedlings in flooded paddies. Rice fields against the background of Mt. Fuji became a common motif in visual art to represent “agrarian Japan,” i.e., “the Japan.” Travelers, often depicted in these woodblocks, symbolize the transient and changing Japan epitomized by Edo (Tokyo), where they are headed, while rice paddies represent our land and the primordial Japanese identity, uncontaminated by modernity and foreign influences as represented by the city.<sup>3</sup>

Inherent in the representations of landscape and subsistence activities are temporal representations. Flooded rice fields, like rice-planting songs, are the most familiar sign of spring or early summer, the time of birth and growth. Rice harvesting scenes, including sheaves of rice stalks—the most frequently used motif—represent fall and its joyful harvest, the end of the growing season. What is striking from the perspective of representation is that these cycles of rice growth became markers of the seasons for all Japanese. For urbanites, fishermen, and all other non-agrarian people, their lives were marked by rice and its growth.

In addition to the representation of the seasonal cycle, rice and rice paddies symbolize the past. As in many cultures, the pristine past embodying a distinct and sacred Japanese identity, uninfluenced by foreign influences and modernity, represented by the city, is symbolized in the reconstituted agriculture and the rural. The celebration of the primordial self of the Japanese symbolized in agriculture saw heightened expressions by the nativist scholars during the late Edo period and throughout its so-called modernization period. It continues today when the Japanese search for *nature* in the countryside, now nostalgically referred to as *furusato* (old homestead; literally, one’s home region), just as the English urbanites construct their “English countryside.”

In this process of construction and refashioning of the self of the Japanese through the metaphor of rice, rice and rice plants are assigned aesthetics. The aesthetics of rice are expressed in poems, essays, and visual arts, which in turn further propagate the beauty of rice. Even today the aesthetics of rice are extolled. Ripe ears of rice stalks are described to have golden luster. The association is between their color and “rice as money,” since the character *kin* (or *kane*) refers both to money and gold. A pair of ¥60 stamps, one with a picture of succulent ears of rice and the other with a poem written in brush strokes praising the fragrance of new rice grains, were issued recently. The visual message of these stamps is powerful: not only is rice beautiful, its beauty is as quintessentially Japanese as a Japanese brush stroke.

Rice grains, both raw and cooked, are beautiful. The most important characteristics are the related qualities of luster, purity, and whiteness. In his *Inei Raisan (In Praise of Shadows)*, twentieth-century novelist Tanizaki Junichirō extols the beauty of cooked rice:

“When cooked rice is in a lacquer container placed in the dark, shining with black lustre, it is more aesthetic to look at it and is more appetizing. When you lift the lid [of the lacquer container], you see pure white rice with vapor coming out of it. *Each grain is a pearl*. If you are a Japanese, you certainly appreciate rice when you look at it this way (in a lacquerware container placed in the dark).”<sup>4</sup>

This passage illustrates the aesthetics of rice as developed perhaps most highly among the elite but shared also by the folk.

Even today, rice, called “pure rice (*junmai*)” or “white rice (*hakumai*),” has an aesthetic quality. The two kinds of rice preferred by most Japanese today are labeled “*koshihikari*” and “*sasanishiki*.” The term *hikari* means light or luster in Japanese, and *nishiki* means gold. Both labels thus emphasize the luster of rice, that is, its aesthetics. Like deities cum mirrors, the aesthetics of rice must lie in luster, whiteness, and purity.<sup>5</sup>

The construction and representation of the self is almost always prompted by a need to demarcate one's self from the Other. That is, the presence of or pressure from the Other precipitates the reaffirmation of "we," as opposed to "they." Contrary to the stereotype of Japan as an isolated country tucked away in the northeast corner of the world, Japan's history is a series of conjunctures during which internal developments were to a large degree in response to flows in world history.

Of all conjunctures, the two that sent the most profound and lasting shock waves throughout the country were Japan's encounter with the high civilization of Tang China between the fifth and seventh centuries, and the encounter with Western civilization at the end of the nineteenth century. In both cases, the Japanese were overwhelmed by the civilizations "out there" and hurriedly and earnestly attempted to learn about and imitate them. The heretofore illiterate Japanese adopted en masse the Chinese writing system, even though the two spoken languages were totally unrelated, and thus not transferable without considerable difficulty. Likewise, metallurgy, city planning, and a whole range of other features of Chinese civilization were eagerly adopted by the Japanese. Despite the eagerness with which the Japanese adopted features of Chinese civilization, the Japanese self could not simply be merged with that of the Chinese. As we saw, the emperor Tenmu (r. 672–686) commissioned to compile the myth-histories of the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki* in order to establish a Japanese identity in opposition to Tang China. In short, the Japanese conception of self was born in the encounter with the Chinese.

In an effort to redefine Japanese identity, the Japanese distinguished items imported from China by adding the term *kan* (Han), *kara* (Tang) or *tō* (Tang), as in *kanji* (Chinese characters). While the phrase *wakan secchū* meant a combination of Japanese and Chinese ways, a most revealing expression for the relationship between self and other is *wakon kansai*—the Japanese soul and Chinese brilliance. Referring to the best of the two worlds at that time, the phrase represents a Japanese effort to preserve their identity as "the Japanese soul." We recall that in ancient Japan, rice was symbolically equivalent to the soul of the deity encapsulated in the husk of rice. Therefore, a seemingly simple expression like "Japanese soul and Chinese brilliance (*wakon kansai*)" reveals the enormous importance of rice in the Japanese perception of the self and cosmology in general.

When the country reopened at the end of the nineteenth century after more than two centuries of isolation, it again went through the painful experience of encountering another "superior" civilization, this time, the West, with its scientific and technological advances. Once more, under the slogan of "Civilization and Enlightenment (*bunmei kaika*)," the Japanese avidly adopted many aspects of this civilization, while again guarding their own Japanese identity and self.

This powerful Other prompted frequent public discourse, in which the distinction between Japanese and Westerners was expressed as rice vs. meat (or bread). At the time of the second visit in 1854 by Commodore Perry, the government staged sumo wrestlers to lift heavy sacks of rice to show the strength of the Japanese.

To further complicate the matter, the Japanese had to face the fact that, for the West, the Japanese were indiscriminately labeled "Orientals," just as, ironically, the Japanese lumped all Westerners together. This more complex international scene required the Japanese to simultaneously extricate themselves from other Asians or Orientals—especially Chinese and Koreans—on the one hand, and to distinguish themselves from the West, on the other.

While the distinction between Japanese and Westerners can be easily made and expressed as rice vs. meat (or bread), the much more difficult distinction between Japanese and other Asians could not be expressed as rice vs. some other food item, since other Asians also eat rice. The distinction therefore must take the form of rice grown on Japanese soil vs. foreign rice.

Surfacing toward the end of the Early Modern period, the symbolic opposition between domestic rice (*naichimai*) as a metaphor for the Japanese was contrasted with foreign rice



**Katsushika Hokusai**

Japanese, 1760–1849

Lower Meguro, from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mt. Fuji*  
1830-1835

Color woodcut

Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin  
Madison, Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.2404

*Nowhere is the construction  
of the countryside more vividly  
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prints (ukiyo-e) of the time.*

*A most common motif of  
prints by Hokusai and  
Hiroshige relates to rice  
and rice agriculture: rice  
farmers at work, sheaves of  
harvested rice, seedlings in  
flooded paddies.*



Utagawa Hiroshige

Japanese, 1797–1858

Mt. Kyodai and the Moon Reflected on the Rice Fields at

Sarashina in Shinano Province, no. 25 from the series *Pictures of Famous Places in the Sixty-odd Provinces*

1853

Color woodcut

Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin Madison,

Bequest of John H. Van Vleck, 1980.1320

*All through the modernizing period, the construction of the Japanese national identity by the military government involved the use of foodstuffs, especially rice, such as hinomaru bentō (the rising-sun lunch)—a box lunch with a red pickled plum in the center of a white bed of rice.*

(*gaimai*) as a metaphor for other Asians, despite the fact that foreign rice had been introduced for centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The Japanese effort to extricate themselves from other Asians continued during the Meiji period when another metaphor appeared: “the silver rice (*ginmai*)” for Japanese rice as opposed to Nanking rice (*nankinmai*) for Chinese rice, which was assigned inferior quality.

All through the modernizing period, the construction of the Japanese national identity by the military government involved the use of foodstuffs, especially rice, such as *hinomaru bentō* (the rising-sun lunch)—a box lunch with a red pickled plum in the center of a white bed of rice. The *purity* of white rice (*hakumai*) or “pure rice” (*junmai*) became a powerful metaphor for the purity of the Japanese self. During World War II, white rice had to be saved for the soldiers. For the rest of the population, Japan’s victory promised a return to good times with plenty of domestic white rice, instead of the foreign rice they were forced to eat.

Our memory of the Japanese resistance toward the rice importation in 1993 is still vivid. What surfaced during the rice importation issue reinforces the *symbolic* power of rice for the self identity even today. The Liberal Democratic Party government under successive prime ministers had been paving the way to import rice—a practice done since the medieval period (1185–1603)—while engaging in double talk and telling the Japanese and the world that it will prevent the importation of foreign rice “until death.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike Chinese long-grain rice, California rice is virtually identical with Japanese domestic rice, both in appearance and taste. Nonetheless, not just the government and farmers but also some consumers came to the defense of domestic rice and Japanese rice agriculture, argu-

ing that rice paddies are essential for Japanese land, functioning as flood control by serving as dams, soil conservation, preservation of underground water, purification of air and water, and beautification of the land. We see the recurrence here of the spatial metaphor of rice paddies as *our land*. California rice, in contrast, is grown in American paddies, thus serving *their* land and water, and not *ours*. The equation of self-sufficiency (*jikyū jisoku*) with the exclusive reliance on domestic rice was a frequently used discursive trope. Other metaphors of rice used include: the lifeblood crop, the lifeline (*seimeisen*); the last sacred realm (*saigo no seiki*); the last citadel; national life; and the prototype of Japanese culture.

Furthermore, the opponents of rice importation argued that foreign rice contained chemicals from insecticides and processing. Consumer groups became intensely involved in checking chemicals in foreign rice, some voicing their fears in newspapers, which also reported the “presence” of molds and bad odor on Chinese rice and dead mice in Thai rice, “reaffirming” the *impurity* of imported rices.<sup>8</sup>

While an increasing number of Japanese are willing to accept foreign rice, the twin metaphors of rice as self and rice paddies as *our land* were used by the opponents of rice importation. The emphasis on the functions of domestic rice for land beautification and air purification, coupled with the accusation about chemicals in foreign rice, reinforced the symbolic equations of self/other and purity/impurity.<sup>9</sup> Chemicals, dead mice, etc. symbolize the impurity of foreign rice which poses a threat to the purity of the Japanese self.

Today, we witness a profusion of foreign foods throughout Japan. Not only McDonald’s and numerous other fast foods, but also *haute cuisine* from every culture of the world are available and eagerly sought. Precisely because of the profusion of Western foods, Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) has made a phenomenal comeback. Streetcars and newspapers are full of advertisements by restaurants and inns featuring the modern-day reconstruction of *washoku* with numerous courses of Japanese dishes, almost all made from imported material. Amid a flood of Western foods, the Japanese continue to reaffirm their sense of self by reconstructing their own “traditional” food, defined by the presence of rice, called the main dish (*shushoku*) even in the absence of its quantitative value.

Furthermore, they have Japanized some imported food through the use of rice. For example, with the introduction of McDonald’s, they invented rice burgers, two patties of rice in the shape of a hamburger bun, sandwiching Japanese-type ingredients, such as salmon and Japanese style cooked vegetables.

The story of “Rice as Self” reveals that the Japanese self was in fact born in the discourse with the Chinese, an encounter that necessitated the Japanese to establish their own distinctive identity. They did so by domesticating, literally and figuratively, imported rice. With torrents of global forces breaking on the Japanese shore, “rice as self” continued to surface at critical times—throughout the modernizing period and again in 1993 when the United States threatened Japan with the opening of the rice market. The historical processes involved in rice demonstrate how the global and the local have been two sides of one coin; the global (rice) nourishes, literally and figuratively, enriching the local, which in turn transforms rice to be the local (Japanese) rice. ■

## NOTES

1. For details, see Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; “Structure, Event and Historical Metaphor: Rice and Identities in Japanese History.” *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 30(2)(June, 1995): 1–27; “We Eat Each Other’s Food to Nourish our Body: The Global and the Local as Mutually Constituent Forces.” In, *Food in Global History*, ed. by Raymond Grew. 1999. Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 240–272.
2. The date when wet rice agriculture was introduced is now set around 400 BCE. (Richard Pearson: *Ancient Japan*. 1992. New York: George Braziller). There is still some controversy as to its exact origin, but it was introduced to Japan via the Korean Peninsula to Kyūshū, the southernmost major island of the Japanese archipelago. From there, it spread northeastward in three successive waves, reaching the northeastern region by the beginning of the Christian era (Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan, ed. *Nihon no Rekishi to Bunka* (Japanese History and Culture). 1987. Tokyo: Daiichi Hōki Shuppan, 14).
3. As in other cultures, both the countryside and the city were characterized by positive and negative values—innocent but dumb and backward for the former, and sophisticated but decadent and morally corrupted for the latter.
4. Tanizaki Junichirō 1959 [1933]:17–18; translated by this author; italics added.
5. See Barthes (1970:12–14) for his insightful but overly romantic observation of the aesthetics of Japanese food in general and rice in particular.
6. cf. Sansom [1961:183] for the practice in the thirteenth century.
7. Details of the rice importation issue are in Ohnuki-Tierney 1995.
8. They introduced the English term “post-harvest chemicals” into daily parlance and opposed the government’s plan to mix imported rice with domestic rice. For molds and bad odor on Chinese rice, see *Asahi Shinbun*, February 26, 1994, *Mainichi Shinbun*, Feb. 25 and 26, 1994; for dead mice in Thai rice, see *Asahi Shinbun*, March 19, 1994, *Mainichi Shinbun*, March 19, 1994, all newspaper articles.
9. Purity of the self is at the symbolic core of ethnicity and nationalism, be it the “racial purity” of Hitler’s Germany, Mao’s slogan “today pure but poor; tomorrow pure and powerful,” or the recent ethnic “cleansing” in Bosnia.

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In addition to *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time* (Princeton University Press), her single-authored books include: *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History* (University of Chicago Press), *The Monkey as Mirror: Symbolic Transformations in Japanese History and Ritual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan: An Anthropological View* (Cambridge University Press), *Illness and Healing among the Sakhalin Ainu: A Symbolic Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press), *The Ainu of the Northwest Coast of Southern Sakhalin; Sakhalin Ainu Folklore* (Waveland Press). Most of her books were rewritten as Japanese language version, and some are translated into Italian, Korean, and Russian.



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