

Column: “Japanese People and Rice”



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My father, who runs a rice retailing business, says, “Nowadays, Japanese people eat much less rice than they did in the old days.” Indeed, the annual consumption of rice per capita in Japan has dropped nearly in half, from about 120 kg 50 years ago to about 60 kg today. Records show that during the Edo period about two centuries ago, the per capita rice consumption was more than 200 kg. This drop in consumption is because Japanese people have come to eat highly nutritious foods in recent years, such as meat, eggs, and milk and have thus become less dependent on rice.

Rice used to be the staple food for Japanese people. Nearly 90% of rice protein consists of amino acids essential for the human body, and rice also contains many calories. Since 100 g of rice contains about 356 kcal, eating 400 g of rice per day can cover the basal metabolic rate of an adult man. As long as you have rice, you only need some soy beans, vegetables, small amounts of fish and seaweed (kelp, wakame, or hijiki), and a little bit of salt for a perfect longevity diet.

In addition, the productivity of rice can be enhanced, with harvests able to be increased by devoting time and effort. Japanese people are diligent, and find joy in making efforts. Because the efforts put into rice farming are rewarded by the visible results of the harvest, it seems natural that Japanese people became dedicated to growing rice. In other words, the rice food culture fits the nature of the Japanese people.

Here is one example. Rice is originally a tropical plant that grows in climates with a rainy and a dry season. In Japan, the conditions of these two seasons are artificially created by flooding the paddy fields when planting rice, and then draining the water upon harvesting. Meanwhile, there are two factors that make rice tastier: plenty of good-quality water, and a large temperature difference between daytime and nighttime. The Unuma area in Niigata Prefecture, a cold area with heavy snowfall during winter that is well-known for rice farming, has both of these factors. People in the region developed cold-resistant rice varieties, and endeavored to make tasty rice through many years of efforts in narrow parcels of land. As a result, Unuma Koshihikari rice has come to constantly boast the top rating in Japan.

Furthermore, group work is suitable for rice farming. The steps in the series of work necessary for rice farming—from preparing paddy fields, rice-planting, and constant weeding to harvesting—are better to be conducted all at once by a group of people at specific times of the year. In addition, if many people devote time and effort by using a large paddy field, a far more abundant harvest can be expected than by working individually in small paddy fields. Because of this, groups were gradually formed for the purpose of rice farming. Through such organized rice farming, Japanese people began to prioritize the determination of the group

over the ideas of individuals. This is considered to have led to the mentality of always being sensitive toward the people's thoughts, and trying to provide service that goes beyond expectations—the spirit of *omotenashi*. On the other hand, there was a need for a ruler to lead the group, and people's reluctance to becoming ruled diminished. This may be one of the reasons why Japanese people today often tend to feel hesitant about stating their opinions, and tend to wait for instructions from others.

Considering these factors, it would be no exaggeration to say that Japanese people's identity has been formed through rice farming.

With Japanese people's spirit of *omotenashi* winning high praise, Tokyo was chosen as the venue for the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Behind this accomplishment, however, was the presence of a British advisor who suggested that the presenters should more actively emphasize the good parts of Japan that even Japanese people may not be aware of. Moreover, although a boom in Japanese cuisine is presently existing around the world, it should be noted that this trend was not triggered by Japanese people, either.

If Japanese people cannot state their own opinions in an era of global competition, Japan cannot be expected to achieve sustainable growth.

Japanese people are today no longer dependent on rice, as various new foodstuffs have been incorporated to form the current Japanese cuisine. Moreover, Japanese people's identity is also likely to have transcended its rice-derived identity. We should now be striving to interact with many people overseas, experience different cultures, and increase our diversity.

Through this process, just as we may rediscover how tasty rice is, we should realize the attractiveness of Japanese people's sensitivity and the spirit of *omotenashi*, in order to further improve these positive aspects and actively draw attention to them throughout the world. I believe that this is what Japanese people ought to do in the future.

The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games also provide a good opportunity to review what Japanese people should be like. I hope that many people visiting Japan from all over the world will find Japan to be a very nice country. The devotion of time and effort to that end is the assignment given to Japanese people today.

