



HARVESTING INSIGHTS FROM RICE IN EAST ASIAN STUDIES

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Thinking about “the role of rice in Asia” from our disciplinary perspectives as an economist and a political scientist, we are excited by its centrality to economic, social, and political development. We teach a class to college sophomores that uses rice to explore the long transitions from agrarian to industrial societies and how changes in eating and attitudes towards food mirror larger societal shifts. Our class, *Rice and Society in East Asia*, is third in a four-course sequence offered at St. Olaf College. By the time they enroll in our course, students have been studying together for a year, having completed an intensive writing course on the family; an historical overview of China and Japan; and two courses in either Chinese or Japanese. Following our course, the students travel to China and Japan during the college’s January interim term for their fourth and final course in the sequence, looking closely at the societies they have studied for the past three semesters. While *Rice and Society in East Asia* was developed specifically for this special program, different segments of the course would work well for high school classes such as World History or World Geography.

The “rice course” remains true to its originally stated purpose: “Using rice (and agriculture more generally) as a means of access, this course will introduce students to an examination of the societies, politics, and economies of East Asian countries. Drawing on social science methods—in particular the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics—it will look at both traditional East Asian societies as well as the drive for modernization and the consequences that modernization has had on these societies.” Additionally, the course was intended to help students understand how social science methodologies can contribute to an understanding of East Asia. To advance this goal, students begin to learn and use social science research skills. For example, after reading several essays about McDonald’s in East Asian cities, the class goes on a field trip to the local McDonald’s to observe systematically how customers use the space: how long they stay, who they are with, whether they are eating full meals or snacking.

While specific topics within the course, and most certainly books and readings used to illuminate those topics, have changed over the years, *Rice and Society in East Asia* has remained a social-science-oriented course. Students are challenged to use tools of anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science even though the course does not intend to make social scientists of all those enrolled. In some instances this means providing basic introduction to theories and methodologies of these disciplines. But, for

the most part, students come to see how the social sciences inform an understanding of East Asia by reading and discussing materials using this orientation; most especially, by taking care to think about specific causal arguments that can be supported with empirical evidence. Ultimately, students come to model these approaches in their own research and writing.

As the third class in our Asian Conversations sequence, *Rice and Society in East Asia* meets three pedagogical goals: (1) continues students’ introduction to substantive information about East Asian societies; (2) introduces social science reasoning and argumentation styles; and (3) further develops students’ information literacy and writing skills.

From the students’ perspectives, gaining more information about East Asia is clearly the most attractive of these three course goals. Because they have chosen to join the Asian Conversations learning community, we are fairly well assured that these students will be enthusiastic about Asia. We also expect, however, that behind their general enthusiasm lays a rich variety of specific passions. Beyond the obvious differences that stem from choosing to study Chinese versus Japanese, students could be most interested in anything from *anime* to economic development to traditional art or Chinese opera. The rice trope, by serving as a window into the social and economic structures that shape life in East Asia, allows us to hold a motivated group of students together on a thematic track while concurrently allowing them to delve further into the issues that most interest each individual.

Students learn about rice and rice production in a literal sense. Lectures and readings throughout the semester highlight the variety of rice species, the extent of its production and cultivation historically and currently, and patterns of rice consumption throughout the world. This literal study of rice, however, occurs within a three-part framework to explore socio-economic institutions and traditions over time.

First, we ask students to think about food production. Using Francesca Bray’s *The Rice Economies* as our main text, the class considers how agricultural systems fit into East Asian societies. Bray argues that the type of land, the suitability of particular agricultural techniques for wet-rice farming, and the labor supply historically available set a path for economic development in Asia that is markedly distinct from that which arose in Europe. Students learn that the specific agricultural system and technologies associated with rice growing caused many of the distinctive traits associated with Asian societies, such as an emphasis on communal spirit over

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individuality. We illustrate this point by using a simulation in class, which would work well with high school students. The simulation, based on the “prisoners’ dilemma,” highlights the competitive perspective that is so often a part of American students’ perspective. By contrast, when Dalgaard ran this simulation in Asian countries, students played from a cooperative perspective. Class ends with animated discussion about this comparison.

We also take pains to teach that these systems and traits do change over time. Economic development and industrialization pull people off the land and into the cities, setting up new tensions between urban and rural ways of life, dramas of internal migration, and possibilities for prosperity and poverty. Societies grapple with such changes through politics, which provides us with an opening to consider states and social movements. The monographs from Abelmann, Dore, Chang et al., and Hayami and Kikuchi offer rich accounts of how political struggles to control land and labor have shaped food production in Japan, China, Korea, and the Philippines. Dore’s lovingly detailed stories about farming, family, and neighborly relations and Chan et al.’s dramatic narrative on how a south Chinese village was swept up in the turmoil of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and Deng’s economic reforms of the 1980s would be especially suitable for high school classes. Short selections from either book could be used to illustrate any one of these questions.

The second part in the course framework concerns the meaning of food. Here the key text is Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney’s *Rice as Self*, which provides an opportunity to teach about the construction and use of symbols and identities. Our discussions shift from a focus on the generalizable structures of class, state, and economy involved in food production to the specificities of cultural differentiation. *Rice as Self* also allows us to introduce discussions of religious practices in Japan.

The third and final piece in the framework is food consumption. The hands-down favorite read for the students, James Watson et al.’s *Golden Arches East*, sets up lively discussions about how globalization plays out in Asian contexts. Since the students have just finished reading Ohnuki-Tierney’s monograph, they are well primed for a discussion of how culturally specific meanings of food are worked out in everyday settings.

Another interesting theme that can be developed as the course moves from Bray to Watson is how to go about comparing “Asia” to the “West.” Students will automatically reference their own life experiences in a class of this sort: as instructors, we have found that the readings available on the theme of rice help us guide students towards a more nuanced sense of how to negotiate comparison. Bray’s work has an almost polemical undertone: she opens her book by arguing that because Asia is more than “not Europe,” efforts to measure economic development in Asia against paths of progress grounded in different agricultural techniques are, first of all, wrongheaded, and, secondly, dangerous to the extent that they blind international institutions to the specific needs of the poorer rice economies.

Watson and his coauthors take on the charge that Asia is at the mercy of homogenizing globalization by gamely portraying urban residents as making McDonald’s their own, thereby distinguishing the consumption practices that occur there from those here in the US. *Golden Arches East* can be read as an ode to agency and local culture in the face of Westernization. Juxtaposed with Bray, it suggests once again that we go badly wrong to assume that Asian experiences can be easily measured by simply pairing them off against a “Western” standard.

As we mentioned above, *Rice and Society in East Asia* serves as the third class in the four sequenced classes of the Asian Conversations program. Our starting point in creating this class within the Asian Conversations Program was to give the students a survey introduction to the social sciences to round out their study of the fundamentals about China and Japan while concurrently fulfilling general education requirements. The unifying theme of rice, moving through the framework of production, meaning, and consumption, places the class upon a solid enough foundation to allow the instructor to teach the basics of social scientific approaches through introduction of debates about causality, generalization, evidence, and method. Additionally, the centrality of rice for Asian societies means that it has been studied in some way by each of the distinct disciplines of economics, anthropology, sociology, and political science. Consequently, students end the semester with a preliminary notion of what each one of these disciplines involves. Our hope is that they will also leave the course aware that they can combine an interest in social scientific themes with a passion for Asian Studies.

Students have, by and large, responded positively to the course. It was clear from the beginning that students did not want to become “mini-economists or fledgling political scientists” and we did not intend the course to make them such. Combining practical topics, historical and contemporary, with some core social science theory meant that students were not overwhelmed. If anything, many students saw the value of more social science analysis. The introduction of Francesca Bray’s book as core reading actually resulted from students asking for an economic framework for the course. Our sense of the students’ reaction to this course is that it is received very positively in part because of the immediacy of the January interim study tour to China and Japan. While during the first year, students of Asian Conversations courses could approach their discussions in the abstract, regardless of how practical much of the information is, by the time they take the “rice course” they realize that soon they will be putting their knowledge to work. That reality, it seems, helps motivate students. We have been impressed by their willingness to tackle difficult materials and their eagerness to explore complicated topics. Certainly the first-year courses give them the background that allows this more sophisticated analysis, but we feel also that they are aware of the value of this course because of their impending travels.

The “rice course” is a natural extension of the historical themes developed in the first two courses of the Asian Conversations Pro-

gram. For colleagues at other institutions, however, the issues we have reviewed here could be addressed through either a free-standing elective providing a thematically-based introduction to Asian societies, or one of several modules about rice introduced into already existing high school or college classes. In either case, Carolyn Heinz's interdisciplinary introduction to Asian cultures would give students necessary background. One specific assignment that worked well for us and that holds promise as a "rice module" is creating rice collages. Students prepare collages that represent rice in both traditional and contemporary settings. Web sites—such as <http://www.riceweb.org/>—provide excellent sources for relevant images. Students also find this assignment an opportunity to visit the Asian section of grocery stores to collect popular rice products. It takes additional prompting before they find representations of rice from earlier time periods. The discussion that follows the presentation of the collages always highlights the continuing importance of rice in Asian societies, but also reinforces the changing role and symbolism that rice represents in contemporary societies.

We are convinced that rice offers a window into Asian societies that is provided by few other topics. It transcends time and place and allows us to compare and contrast peoples and societies. It also allows us to open our conversations to the broader topic of food in general. Students like this. They simply "eat up" the Watson book on McDonald's in East Asia. They are adept at exploring with us the ways that food illuminates societies and the changes that take place as societies modernize. They tell us that while rice sounded somewhat esoteric when we started the course, as the weeks passed they began to see how useful, to say nothing of how meaningful, rice is. We are convinced that there are unlimited possibilities for us to develop the "rice course" as a meaningful and engaging introduction to East Asia. ■

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following is a list of monographs that have been used in at least one of the five iterations of this course.

- Ablemann, Nancy. *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Ethnography of peasant farmers coming to Seoul in the late 1980s to challenge land distribution patterns. Although the theoretical discussions are challenging for undergraduates, the compelling story of alliances between tenant farmers, students, and activists provides a helpful sense of how the rural/urban divide fits into Korea's democratization.
- Bray, Francesca. *The Rice Economies: Technology & Development in Asian Societies*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 (originally published 1986). Presents a logical, historical explanation of the development of Asia's rice economies. Based on solid economic analysis presented in a rigorous but non-technical, understandable fashion. Essential source for bringing a social science perspective into a course on rice and society.
- Buck, Pearl S. *The Good Earth*, New York: Washington Square Press/Pocket Books, 1999 (originally published 1931). Often criticized, perhaps with good reason, this novel of rural life in pre-revolutionary China provides a necessary integration of political/economic issues with a rural, agricultural backdrop.
- Chan, Anita, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unger. *Chen Village under Mao and Deng*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. In clear, accessible prose, Chan et al. tell the story of grassroots reactions to the sweeping economic and political transformations over almost half a century in the People's Republic of China.
- Chang, Eileen. *The Rice-Sprout Song*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998 (originally published 1955). Chang's novel investigates the consequences of political ideology as a motivating force for life in rural twentieth-century China. Although well-written and compelling, the graphic portrayal of rural life in early Communist China often results in students focusing primarily on political issues, making the integration of social and economic topics difficult.
- Dore, Ronald P. *Shinohata: A Portrait of a Japanese Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 (originally published 1980). Another village ethnography, this one set in "pre-miracle" Japan. Changing family structures, standards of living, and local politics all placed within the context of national transformation from the 1950s through the 1970s, with a short addendum on the 1990s' end of LDP dominance over national politics.
- Hayami, Yujiro, and Masao Kikuchi. *A Rice Village Saga: Three Decades of Green Revolution in the Philippines*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000 (published in association with International Rice Research Institute, Makati City, Philippines). Detailed investigation of the effects of the green revolution on a typical Philippines village across three decades. Although quite technical with numerous data tables, this longitudinal study shows the effect of agricultural change in all its dimensions.
- Heinz, Carolyn Brown. *Asian Cultural Traditions*, Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1999. A background text, providing an overview of demographic and cultural factors for numerous countries in East and Southeast Asia. Best used as a reference book.
- Jing, Jun, ed. *Feeding China's Little Emperors: Food, Children and Social Change*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000. Anthropologists investigate the transformation of children's eating habits in modern China. Funded by the same organizations that underwrote *Golden Arches East*, this study is more technical and thus less easily understood by students. Selected readings worked better than assigning the entire book.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993. Detailed anthropological investigation of the changing nature of self in Japan as interpreted through rice as a food and a cultural symbol. Although very detail-oriented and at times technically challenging for undergraduates, this book provided the most thorough and insightful analysis of how rice helped shaped Japanese cultural identity.
- Watson, James L., ed. *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997. Widely acclaimed for its insightful anthropological analysis of how McDonald's has adapted itself to Asian cultural settings and influenced ways of eating, this book served as an excellent source to move discussions on the cultural significance of food into the contemporary setting.
- Yoshimura, Akira. *Shipwrecks*, San Diego: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1996 (originally published 1982). This novel explores questions of good and evil in the context of a struggling seaside Japanese village. Provides excellent insight into the difficult life of rural medieval Japan and the central role that food played in daily existence.

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