

CURRICULUM MATERIALS REVIEWS



THE ART OF RICE

Spirit and Sustenance in Asia

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CURRICULUM RESOURCE UNIT BY LYN AVINS AND BETSY D. QUICK

THE ART IN RICE: SPIRIT AND SUSTENANCE IN ASIA

LOS ANGELES: UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, 2004

THE BOOK

Rice is involved in so many aspects of Asian cultures that considering it exclusively as a food is to have only a partial understanding of its importance to communities in South and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan. Throughout Asia, rites and ceremonies mark the sowing, transplanting, growing, harvesting, storing, cooking, and eating of rice. *The Art of Rice* takes the reader on a remarkable narrative and visual journey to remote and well-traveled locales in Asia, all having rice as a staple food. Modern communities that have abandoned ancient rites associated with rice, contrast with rural villages that retain some, or most, of the ancient ways.

The introduction tells the reader that rice is the primary food for over three billion people, almost half the world's population. Anthropological evidence indicates that it has been cultivated for 8,000 years, originating in China's Yangtze Valley.

In the years following World War II, food shortages threatened famine in many parts of Asia, a plight that prompted the establishment of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Los Banos in the Philippines. By 1966, IRRI was distributing a high yield, weather resistant variety of rice that had a shorter growing period than traditional strains planted by Asian farmers for centuries. In twenty-seven years—from 1966 to 1993—Southeast Asian countries using the new miracle rice experienced an eighty-three percent increase in production.

With expanding use of the fast-growing grain, many old rites embedded in Asian cultures were no longer applicable. For example, when rice was planted and harvested once a year, holidays were established to note these milestones. Such celebrations were frequently seasonal. With sowing and harvesting taking place two and three times each year, the calendar holidays established under different planting cycles no longer applied. In addition, government regulation became an issue as use of fertilizer and sale of crops came under state or local control. In different parts of Asia, the shorter growing season and increased grain yield was met with mixed reaction. Residents of a rural East Javanese village placed the blame for a number of chaotic incidents that occurred there on their failure to observe the age-old rituals honoring the rice goddess Dewi Sri. By

contrast, in South Korea, where government involvement in agricultural reform has resulted in the disappearance of traditional rice farming rituals, loss of the old ways seems to be of little concern among the country's growing urban population.

Kik Soleh Adi Pramono, a puppet master (*dalang*) in East Java, composed a shadow play on this subject, decorating the puppet Dewi Sri with hair of rice stalks and using a rice field snake as her magical transport. This Wayang story dramatizes negative aspects of the Green Revolution. In the Philippines, an Ifugao woman reminisces wistfully about past times of rice transplanting when her father chanted the myths, pigs were slaughtered, and men drank heavily of rice wine in celebration. However, not all of her father's contemporaries share her nostalgia for the old ways, commenting that appeasing the gods in the underworld and skyworld was a bad thing. Some attribute such opinions to the introduction of Christianity, whose adherents frowned on the rituals honoring rice deities. Others would view the large quantities of rice produced in multiple yearly crops as providing a less labor-intensive lifestyle.

Many ancient rites and ceremonies related to growing, harvesting, and storing rice involve performing arts. The Tharu in Nepal perform ritual dances nightly from the time rice is planted until the harvest. During the summer months in India, Hindu epics are dramatized in night and street theatre to honor Ponniyamman, a Tamil rice goddess. Processions are perhaps the most common form of celebration. The Apotropiac Plank is an illustrated board carried by a procession of naked men to rid the field of insects in Java. Balinese taking the role of gods walk on a strip of cloth scattered with cooked rice that then becomes blessed and much in demand by the people. The Ghost Festival of Dan Sai in Thailand—featuring a sacred stone, ghosts, and rain-inducing rockets in honor of the Buddha's last incarnation—encourages a favorable harvest. In Vietnam, the Trờ Trám Festival accommodates Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism along with midnight fertility rites. It honors a Chinese woman who allegedly taught the people to grow rice.

Rice wine, distilled and consumed in traditional ways throughout Asia, is used in many of these ceremonies. Japanese sake, perhaps the best known of these beverages, is steeped in tradition throughout the brewing process. As an indication of its cultural significance, traditional containers of sake are stored in Shinto shrines.

Rice has been prevalent in decorative arts of the region for centuries. From earliest time, carvings on granary doors, dolls made from rice stalks, and wooden figures representing rice deities have been among Asia's most sacred artifacts. As time passed, more sophisticated objects appeared in the form of carved and painted containers and woven costumes. This is especially evident in Japanese kimonos from the Edo Period, when rice terraces, harvesting scenes, and sheaves of rice were among the many designs found on the traditional garment. In ancient China, where superstition and folk beliefs were discouraged, scrolls were decorated with scenes of workers planting and harvesting rice, rather than creative interpretations of goddesses and folk tales. Modern Asian paintings often depict the plight of the traditional rice farmer and frequently carry the message of a desolate future for the old ways. A striking painting by Filipino artist Alfredo Esquillo, Jr., presents farmers in traditional field clothing sharing space with sportily-clad players on a

golf course. The Korean artist Kim Chong-hon shows a rice field and the patterned floor covering in a house flowing incompatibly into one another. A photograph from the International Rice Research Institute's archives records a freezer vault where thousands of strains of rice are stored—many are old varieties. All of these illustrate modernity encroaching on tradition.

The text in this book is clear and informative. Stunning photographs complement the essays and give the reader unique insight into the role of rice in the many cultures of Asia. Together they provide an opportunity to learn about little-known customs and folkways that revolve around a plant essential to life for half the people on the planet.

THE CURRICULUM RESOURCE UNIT

BY AVINS, LYN AND BETSY D. QUICK

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The first unit in the study guide covers sacred aspects of rice production and consumption. It refers to *The Art of Rice* and the slides that accompany the guide. A wide geographical and religious selection of activities provide classes with a diverse range of materials. The narrative selections in Unit I appear to target middle-upper elementary school students; however, many activities concentrate on crafts and seem more appropriate for lower to middle elementary students.

The second unit covers celebrations and rice as food. The narrative section is brief, with a wide range of accompanying activities concentrating on a spectrum of elementary school classes. The activity section of Unit II provides recipes from seven countries. Some look delicious and would be interesting for a small class to prepare.

Unit III looks at methods of agriculture in swidden (a temporary agricultural plot produced by cutting back and burning off vegetative cover) and wet rice fields. The activities for this unit are a little more complex and appropriate for slightly older students, although craft projects such as decorating digging sticks would appeal to younger students. The rice-growing activity and calendar are excellent learning exercises.

Unit IV considers traditions in a changing world and questions how unforeseen results can affect the best of agricultural methods. It discusses how seemingly positive change can produce unexpected results with serious consequences. The activities for this unit are meaningful and are appropriate for older students. Those relating to cause and effect, such as considering dilemmas that arise with change and how different people see different aspects of the same issue, are especially worthwhile.

The study guide makes excellent use of a complex and multifaceted book with a great many short essays covering myriad aspects of a complex subject. The guide focuses on important issues and uses *The Art of Rice* as a constant resource. ■

FLORENCE LAMOUREUX is the Outreach Coordinator/Associate Director at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawai'i. She holds an MA in Asian Studies and specializes in the development of K-12 teaching materials on Southeast Asia. Under her supervision the Center for Southeast Asian Studies has developed thirty lesson packets for teachers, twelve high school level workbooks, two CD-ROMs, a picture archive of more than 2,000 photographs of Southeast Asia, and five activity books for K-3rd grade.

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