

Lesson 2 – Early China

Rice Culture

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When we study Chinese history and the evolution of Chinese culture, one of the first things that we need to talk about is the importance of rice and the rice economy to China. This is true for much of Southeast Asia and for Japan as well, so a lot of the discussion we'll have about rice will carry over to the Japan part of this course too.

Rice has traditionally been the staple crop of southern China, mostly below the Yangzi River. It is well adapted to the climate of the region. Yields of rice are very high from small plots of land. In southern China, multiple crops can be sown in one year. At least two crops of rice can be grown in south China in a year. It has a long history in the area. Rice has been cultivated in south China for 5,000 to 8,000 years. This is one of the first cultivated crops in human history. A large population crowded into a small area of arable land can be sustained in south China, and as we shall see, in Japan as well, by rice farming, at least as it is done in East Asia.

The Challenges of Growing Rice

Let's talk a bit about rice and what growing rice is like. How do you grow rice? Do you just take a box of Uncle Ben's, throw it out the window, wait for fall, and start eating? No. Rice is a very demanding and difficult crop. Rice is very particular about the conditions under which it wants to grow in order to get the highest possible yield. Rice needs to be grown in fields that can be flooded and then



drained. In the early part of rice's development, it likes to have wet feet. It likes to be in mud, really soupy water as much as mud. It likes really wet fields. However, as the rice plant develops and matures, it wants to have drier feet. So that by the time you harvest the rice, it wants to be in more or less dry fields. Why did rice evolve this way? Think about climate. Southeast Asia, China, and Japan are all part of a monsoon climate, which means that because of the weather patterns in that area, you get huge amounts of rain—often torrential rain—in the early summer on a daily basis. As the year goes by, in the late summer and early fall it dries out again. Rice is particularly adapted to this monsoon climate of wet and flooding followed by dryness.

This fact that rice needs to grow in flooded fields for at least part of the year determines where it can be grown. Can you grow rice on a hillside? How do you do it? You've got to terrace it. You can't just go to a normal hillside, throw some rice on it, and expect it to grow. You have to cut into the hillside and make terraces. You make your rice paddies perfectly flat, so the water will stay in them. That way, you can use all the land available. To grow this rice and to get the highest possible yield, you also need a lot of infrastructure. Although in China and Japan it does still rain a lot in the early summer, you can't count on Mother Nature always doing what's best for the crops. To get top yields, you have to be able to control the water. You have to be able to put it into the fields when you want it, and you have to be able to take it out of the fields when you no longer need it. You need substantial water-control infrastructure: dams, dikes, sluices, an entire system to make rice farming work. This takes a lot of manpower, not just to build this infrastructure but then to maintain all these waterworks. It requires a lot of coordination. It requires a lot of management to make sure it is functional. In many ways, rice farming isn't like the type of agriculture we are used to in the West. It is not like the dry-field agriculture we're familiar with in Kansas or in Europe. It's not like maintaining livestock. It requires a lot of human intervention, infrastructure, and government intervention to make it work.



Controlling this water is not an individual affair. One person cannot build the dikes, dams, and sluices necessary to bring the water in and then drain it out. It has to be a cooperative endeavor. If everyone is trying to get the same scarce resource at one time of the year and then later on is trying to drain that scarce resource, it could be an absolute disaster. Unless you think about how you, as well as your neighbor, are going to get the water you need, and how later you're going to drain off your water without flooding your neighbor's fields or getting flooded yourself, the system isn't going to work. There isn't going to be a maximization of the rice you can produce. Here in Kansas and the Great Plains, we are very familiar with water-control problems and water-rationing issues. People in China have faced this same problem for generations. How do you deal with coordination of this essential resource?

We also need to be aware of how labor intensive rice production is. It takes a lot of hands to grow rice—not just in terms of building and maintaining the waterworks, but also in terms of getting the plants in your paddies and then harvesting the grain at the end of the season. To begin, you have to grow the rice seedlings in a separate plot, then the seedlings are transplanted traditionally by hand into the paddies. We're all familiar with the image of the peasants in their straw hats placing the shoots into the mud. Then the rice has to be carefully tended. If you want a high yield, you have to weed it carefully. You have to go out into the mud every day and take out the weeds. You had to pick the bugs off it in the days before pesticides. The harvest also is a labor-intensive process. Drying and threshing rice take many hands as well. Rice isn't easy. Rice is tough. Rice is a lot of work for a lot of people.

Cultural Implications of the Rice Economy

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What implications has this rice economy, this method of rice farming, had for Chinese culture? How has it shaped Chinese society? Rice farming has influenced Chinese society in four ways. First, the rice economy produces what some historians call the collective life. Rather than the rugged individualism of American farmers and ranchers—at least the myth of rugged individualism that we have in the West—in China agriculture depends on larger units. The family farm doesn't really make sense in China. The family farm can't survive on its own. Only in the extended family, the village, the region, and the nation can agriculture be conceived. Because cooperation is needed to make sure that everybody gets the water and everybody can drain the water, and that such a high level of coordinated manpower is necessary to maintain the waterworks, to plant the rice, to harvest the rice, the Chinese have a much greater sense of working together, of being in a group and cooperating than we do in the West. They're forced to, if they're going to survive. I don't know if on the Western frontier this idea of the rugged pioneer and the independent family farm was true, but certainly in China it was not. The lone Marlboro man on his horse doesn't work in China. It's always a group, because only a group in this rice economy can survive over the long term.



Point number two: because of the need for coordination, especially coordination of water in the rice economy, institutions of administration (that is to say central government), have long been considered desirable and indeed necessary. To make sure that everybody gets the water they need, that no one gets flooded every fall, that the infrastructure is maintained, there needs to be some kind of powerful administrative entity. In China, one of the things we see historically, and we'll see that now when we talk about the Shang dynasty, is that people have had a much different attitude toward government, toward administration, and toward bureaucracy than we do in the West. In China, people accept a level of government intervention that we might not find so comfortable because Chinese people have realized from this experience of working over millennia with the rice economy that it is necessary to

ensure the stability of society, the continuity of the farms, and basic survival. In China people support having a strong central government to maintain the rice economy, so they can survive. Faith in government is a pattern in China, not distrust or suspicion of government as is more the case, perhaps, in the United States.

The Need for Social Stability

Third, because of this strong infrastructure of rice farming, and because the cultivation of rice is so complex and requires such constant attention, there is a tremendous premium placed on social stability in China. Peasants in China value stability and continuity above everything else. That is a fundamental goal. If you think about instability and the effect it could have on society, you can see why the people of China have felt this way. Imagine medieval China and medieval Europe. In the medieval Chinese community, a group of raiders rides into town, kills the men, burns the crops, knocks down the waterworks, destroys the paddies. The women and children are left. What happens to them over the long term? It's not a pretty scene. They don't have the basic infrastructural means to grow their crops to survive. They might not have the labor to put those dikes and dams back together again. It could be the end of this culture. Consider the Western situation then, in Europe in the medieval period, with its dry-field agriculture: the invading army rides into town, kills the men, burns the crops, leaves the women and children. What happens the next year? Maybe they can pull it together. The infrastructure is still there in the sense that the fields are still there. Maybe the community is badly hurt, but it probably has a better chance of survival over the long term. In China, it's a desperate situation that very likely means death. In the West rebound is possible. In China, realizing how vulnerable in many ways the rice economy is because of these waterworks that are necessary, peasants have wanted a stable society and a government that will ensure them this stability. In particular, what one sees in China is that the people are willing to give up personal rights to the government as long as the government guarantees them that things aren't going to change. There's always a trade off of freedom versus stability. In China, traditionally, the people come down pretty strongly in favor of stability. What they want is a government that guarantees the crops will come in, there won't be a war, their community will survive. In America, obviously, our balance has been a bit different. This yearning for stability is certainly one element of the unique pattern of Chinese history.

"A Vicious Interdependence"

Finally, I've talked a little bit about population and dense population. Rice farming gives you what the historian John Fairbank has called "a vicious interdependence between dense population and intensive use of the soil." I'll read from one of Fairbank's books about that, because I think it's an interesting point:

The heavy application of manpower and fertilizer to small plots of land has also had its social repercussions for it sets up a vicious interdependence between dense population and intensive use of the soil whereby each makes the other possible. A dense population provides both the incentive for intensive land use and the means. Once established, this economy acquired inertial momentum. It kept on going. The back-breaking labor of many hands became the accepted norm, and inventive efforts at labor saving were made the exception. Early modernizers of China, in their attempt to introduce the machine, constantly ran up against the vested interests of Chinese manpower since in the short run the machine appeared to be in competition with human hands and backs. Thus, railways were attacked as depriving carters and porters of their jobs and there was no premium upon labor-saving invention.

John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.16.

Fairbank says that because of the tradition of labor intensiveness in agriculture, with everybody always busy attending the rice, there's never any unemployment because everybody could always put more labor into the rice fields. Chinese people have always been quite suspicious of machines that promise to save labor and replace workers. Even today mechanization of paddy rice farming isn't easy, but it has taken place, and in China one sees resistance to replacing traditional methods with new technologies.

The Relationship between Humankind and the Environment

One final point related to rice and the rice economy and the larger issues that Nancy was talking about of geography and the environment in China is the Chinese view of the relationship between humankind and the environment. How do people view nature? How do they view the world around them? In many ways, this is quite different from what we have in the West. Fairbank says,

The ecology of the Chinese, their adaptation to the physical environment, has influenced their culture in many ways. Life on the great river floodplains has always been a hard life. 'Heaven nourishes and destroys' is an ancient saying. On the broad stretches of the plain the patient Chinese farmers were at the mercy of the weather, dependent upon heaven's gift of sun and rain. They were forced to accept natural calamity in the form of drought, flood, pestilence, and famine.

John King Fairbank, *China: A New History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.16.

While we in the West have traditionally liked to think of human beings as being masters of the environment, shaping nature to fit human needs, the Chinese have usually assumed just the opposite. Seeing themselves at the mercy of rain

and rivers, Chinese farmers have not had this traditional Western view—what one might call arrogance—towards the natural world. The upshot of this, however, is that the Chinese people have shown a tendency to be resigned to passivity when dealing with the world. Thus, as opposed to the reforming, crusading spirit of much of the West, the tendency through a good deal of Chinese history has been one of the people just saying, "If that's the way it is, that's the way it is, and there can't be too much done about it." This attitude, to a certain extent at least, grew out of the environmental situation where people said, "We can't control it. We have to accept it." This translated into political and social change as well. We will see this throughout Chinese history. We're not going to see a lot of great social movements, great uprisings from below in Chinese history. Much of what we'll be talking about took place at the elite level. The people have tended to be more accepting, more passive towards change than we in the West like to think we are.