

RICE AS SELF: JAPANESE IDENTITIES THROUGH TIME EMIKO OHNUKI-TIERNEY, 1993

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In *Rice as Self*, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney analyzes how food in Japan, particularly rice, has created identity. Her ethnographic account is a diachronic look at Japanese social group identity transformations through “rice as *our* food” and “rice paddies as *our* land” (4). Rice as a component of identity fortified notions of the collective self and other throughout Japanese history, despite the fact it has become less ritually or economically meaningful recently. Ohnuki-Tierney focuses on a self and other dichotomy because “the rice issue has become the rallying point to defend *the self* when *the other* threatens it” (111). She chose to use rice as the vehicle to talk about Japanese identity because it connects their land, history and rituals in ways other foods, even tea, does not.

Ohnuki-Tierney writes very straightforwardly and organizes *Rice as Self* in a way that is easy for the reader to manage. The first few chapters of the book provide a background for the development of agriculture in Japan and the gradual dominance of rice as the most important source of food symbolically, if not quantitatively. Ohnuki-Tierney highlights controversy concerning exactly how important rice was for the Japanese sustenance throughout history. Some scholars believe other grains, such as millet and wheat were more important nutritionally. Regardless of the controversy and the emphasis put on rice as the staple food, there has always been heterogeneity in Japanese diet. Ohnuki-Tierney feels that even if rice has not been the main source of sustenance or income, it has been a major part of Japanese identity.

Ohnuki-Tierney points out that rice as a dominant symbol for Japanese identity is not necessarily an economically rational phenomenon. In recent history, there has been an exodus from rural Japan to the cities meaning most of the Japanese live in urban areas and have non-agrarian occupations. Even farmers have shifted to part-time work for economic reasons and most are ambivalent about continuing their profession. The affluent, especially urbanites, have become pickier about the quality of the rice they eat, but they are eating less of it replacing rice with more side dishes or Western food. Along with all these changes, Ohnuki-Tierney brings up an interesting paradox. Despite the shift to

an industrial/post-industrial nation state, Japan's major identity component rice, is rooted in its agrarian past.

According to Ohnuki-Tierney, with the decrease in rice consumption per person combined with the decrease in agrarian lifeways, rice as identity is best explained through its symbolic cultural meaning. The next section of *Rice as Self* highlights the importance of rice in myth-histories. Rice is deified and believed to have a soul. While other deities have dual positive (peaceful) and negative (violent) attributes, rice is a unique case. Its deity is only peaceful and pure.

In a particularly intriguing section, Ohnuki-Tierney emphasizes the Japanese interest in purity, wealth, power and aesthetics in relation to rice. In Early Modern times, rice was paid as a tax to the government and a sacred tax to temples and shrines. The elite who received rice were those with power and wealth. Rice as money was considered pure. Ohnuki-Tierney notes that metal currency was introduced to Japan from China, but because of its impure connotations, it took a time span ranging from 1185-1603 to become the dominant monetary unit. She claims that even today, the Japanese feel that money is dirty and impure and children are often told to wash their hands after touching money. Rice has lost its monetary value, but it still maintains its purity. For Ohnuki-Tierney, rice as money and a representation of purity reinforces Japanese collective identity through exclusivity. Only Japanese rice could be used in exchanges. Its meaninglessness to others bolstered its meaningfulness to the Japanese, which in turn, reinforced the self and others dichotomy.

In the final part of the book, Ohnuki-Tierney looks at how varying periods of isolation and confluence with other cultures have impacted Japanese identity. Isolation reinforced collective self identity because there was little influence from the outside. During times of confluence, particularly with the Chinese in the eighth century AD and Western society in the late nineteenth century AD, identity was also reinforced and often rice was used as a tool to maintain identity.

The media and the government contributed to Japanese identity and nationalism. One example Ohnuki-Tierney gives is during World War II when the government proclaimed all the soldiers were provided good white "Japanese rice" that would give them strength. Another example deals with the influence of Western culture. While the Japanese have tried to emulate and surpass Westerners, they maintain purity in their identity with rice. The importance of California rice is not allowed by the government and most people do not want it, even if it tastes the same and would decrease the cost of rice. As far as the Japanese are concerned, the quality of non-Japanese rice pales in comparison to homegrown rice.

Dichotomies are prevalent in *Rice as Self* and I wonder if Ohnuki-Tierney largely overemphasized extremes in Japanese culture. She does mention that in discussions of agriculture urbanites are pitched against rural farmers, despite a number of occupations that do not fall within those categories, such as miners, fishermen and entertainers. However, she continues through the book to stress extremes like pure and impure, rice and other grains, us and them, and etcetera. These stark contrasts might exist in reality, but I question whether or not there is more gray area in Japanese culture than Ohnuki-Tierney lets on. Unfortunately, if she mentioned the in-betweens of the culture it would likely weaken her arguments about how the Japanese have developed a collective social self in relation to others.

Rice as Self is fairly well written. Ohnuki-Tierney often presents a barrage of statistics, controversies and paradoxes in each chapter, but she skillfully organizes and summarizes her information by the end of the chapter. While her ethnography could be construed as being too general, I appreciated her emphasis on the collective self over the individual self because it might better represent how Japanese construct and view their own selves. Ohnuki-Tierney says that they view a person as socially interdependent, unlike the Western stress on independence and individualism. Also, rice and rice products are the “foods used to establish and maintain the most important human relationships” (97). Therefore, it only makes sense that her unit of observation is the social group and not individuals. Most people would have no problem understanding Ohnuki-Tierney’s points and could certainly take something away from her book.

REFERENCES

- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko
1993 *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.