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**The Story of Rice In
Japanese History**

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Notes

It would be fair to say that throughout many periods of Japan's extensive history, rice was more important than gold. While both gold and rice had value and provided a currency for conducting transactions, rice had the added value of being the staple food that provided nourishment and sustenance to the Japanese people.

It is believed that rice plants first came to Japan from Korea and China around 300 BC, along with methods for its successful cultivation.

The cultivation of rice was favoured in many central areas of Honshu by a cool temperate climate, and was an activity engaged in by Japan's farmers, who, for much of the country's history, comprised some 90% of its population.

During the feudal and Tokugawa eras, consecutive phases in Japan's history that covered some 1000 years, it was the country's rice crops during that long period that provided the lubricant that enabled the mechanisms and machinery of Japanese society to function.

In this unit we will begin the course by learning about the integral role that rice played in Japanese culture, with particular emphasis on how it supported Japan's strict social hierarchy in the era prior to the nation's modernization.

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Notes

This slide illustrates the pattern of land use throughout Japan.

It shows less than 15% of the country's land area as arable and therefore sufficiently fertile for the cultivation of rice and other crops.

We can also see that the bulk of the most productive regions for growing rice in Japan are located in the central / eastern regions of Honshu.

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Notes

Rice production was based on the wet cultivation method that was imported from the mainland of Asia.

The growing of rice followed a set pattern every year. One grain of seed rice produces one stalk, which in turn grows a head that contains more than 100 grains.

The horticultural process began with the preparation and seeding of a nursery bed, where the sprouting rice seeds could be more easily monitored and protected from pests while the main fields were prepared for use.

The fields were ploughed by horse, oxen, or manpower then enriched with manure, and flooded with water.

The seedling plants were manually transplanted in the fields, as is illustrated in the above slide.

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Standard Measures in Japan Were Based on Rice



Notes

By medieval times the main crop and staple food of the Japanese people was rice, and this single commodity became so vital that it virtually determined the structure of the country's social hierarchy and shaped the nature of its future commercial development.

Rice was so dominant that the primary measure of a village was not the amount of land area it had under tillage but rather *the quantity of rice* it was regularly able to produce each year.

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The 'Koku'



Notes

The standard historic yardstick for measuring the amount of rice produced in Japan was the *koku*.

A Koku was defined as that amount of rice that was considered **sufficient to sustain a man with food for one year**, which was calculated to be **136 kilograms or 180 litres annually**. **On a per day basis that converts to 370 grams or half a litre in volume.**

With the *koku* providing the base unit of measurement throughout feudal Japan, a number of other key measures in Japanese society were subsequently extrapolated from that base.

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Notes

A daily portion of a koku of rice (half a litre) provides a person with approximately 1,430 calories, which was / is insufficient to provide all of the nutrients required for good health. The traditional rice Japanese diet therefore was / is supplemented with fish, seaweed, soybeans, mushrooms and potatoes and other pickled vegetables.

Because the Buddhist religion discouraged the killing of animals, meat was traditionally not part of the general diet.

Rice however constituted the staple food of Japan and for much of the country's history rice actually served as a currency.

Throughout much of the country farmers were often able to grow a second crop on the rice land during the dry season, including vegetables and fruits, canola, tea, cotton and flax.

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Notes

Rice was so dominant that the primary measure of a Japanese village was not the amount of land area it had under tillage but rather *the quantity of rice* it was regularly able to produce each year.

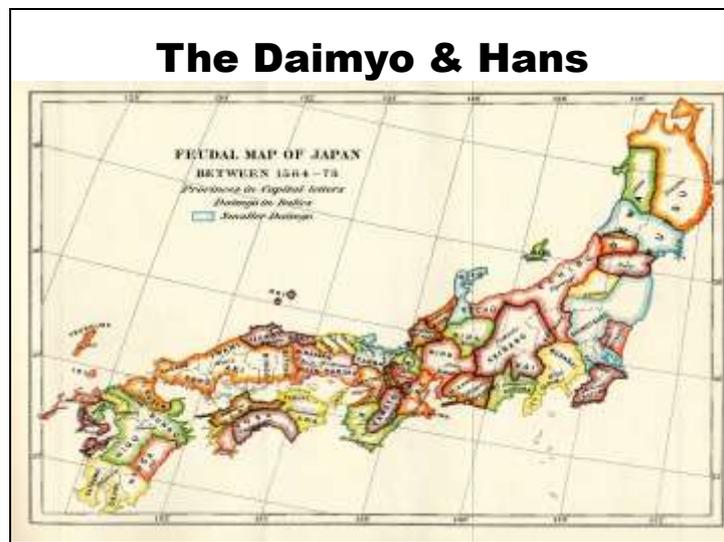
For example, the **standard unit of land measurement** used in Japanese rice field production was the **Cho**.

In Australian terms a Cho is equivalent to just over 1 hectare of land or 2.5 acres in imperial terms.

One **cho** of land in turn was expected to produce **10 koku of rice per annum, on average**, and required the input of **4-5 farmers / labourers**.

On those numbers, the 4/5 workers producing 10 koku of rice would generally expect to retain 4-5 koku for their own subsistence, while the balance of 5-6 koku would be passed to the local lord / Daimyo as tax.

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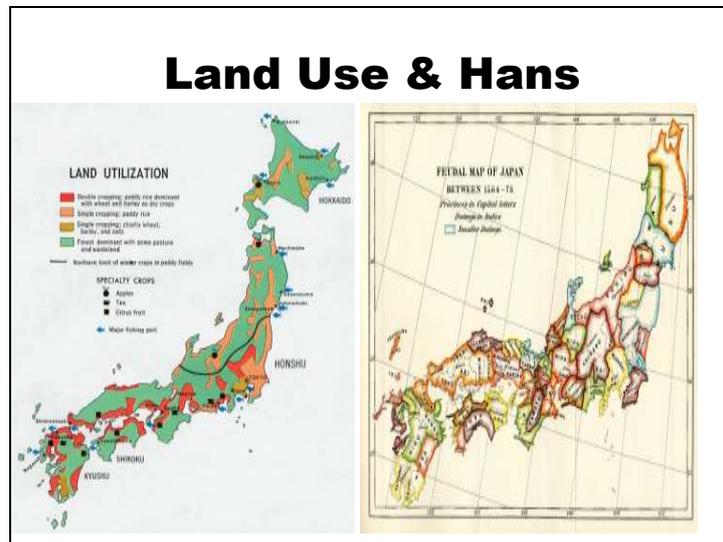
Notes

This map shows from an administrative perspective how the Japanese nation was divided into many smaller provinces (domains /**Han**).

While the number of han / domains varied from time to time, prior to the 16th century, in some eras there were up to 350 Daimyos (Lords), each with his own province or Han.

Looking at the feudal map we can see that han varied considerably in size. For example, find and compare the provinces of **Izu** (139 /35) and **Shinano** (138 /36)

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Notes

The map on the left again illustrates how Japan's land areas were utilized, while that on the right shows the Hans (domains) of the various Daimyo (Lords).

If the two maps are transposed, one can quickly see that the domains / hans of some Daimyos were both larger in size AND located in temperate regions areas where rice production was relatively abundant, for example near Osaka, Nagoya and Tokyo.

The lands controlled by other daimyos however, were located in colder regions where rice production would have been less plentiful. In han that were located in places such as Wakkanai and Kushiro districts on Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, rice was not grown at all.

These regions relied on the production of fish, seaweed and vegetables and other products which were exchanged for rice.

During the course we will learn how the hans / domains located in these more fertile areas were owned by the country's most powerful families and that they derived their power from rice, which in turn supported them in their quests for control of the nation.

The Taxation Systems of Feudal & Tokugawa Japan



Rice taxes being paid to Daimyo, unknown artist, late 16th century. Held at Tokyo University, Japan

Notes

The tax systems in both the feudal and the Tokugawa periods of Japan was based primarily on rice, and in so doing underpinned the Japanese economy by providing the bulk of the country's taxes.

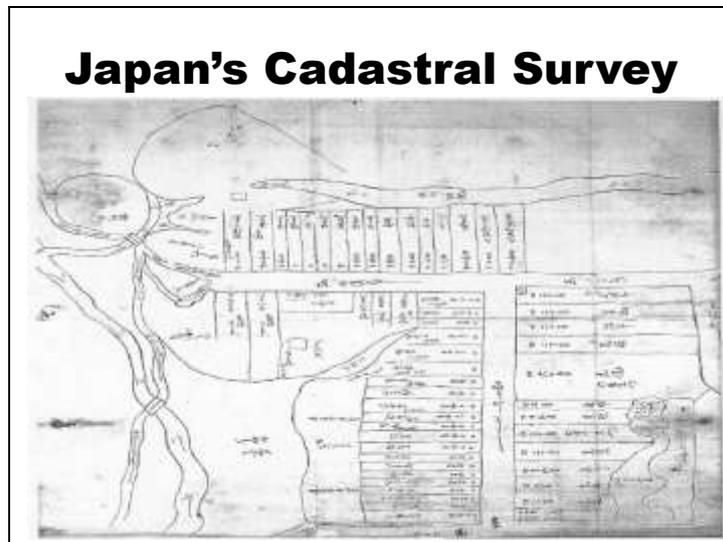
In both eras a Japanese village was taxed as a single unit by the daimyo, with the village headman allocating the tax burden amongst the individual farmers.

The actual taxes were levied and delivered in the form of kokus of rice, and on average farmers usually delivered up some 40%>60% of their annual rice crop yield in taxes.

Rice



Rice taxes being paid to Daimyo, unknown artist, late 16th century. Held at Tokyo University, Japan



Notes

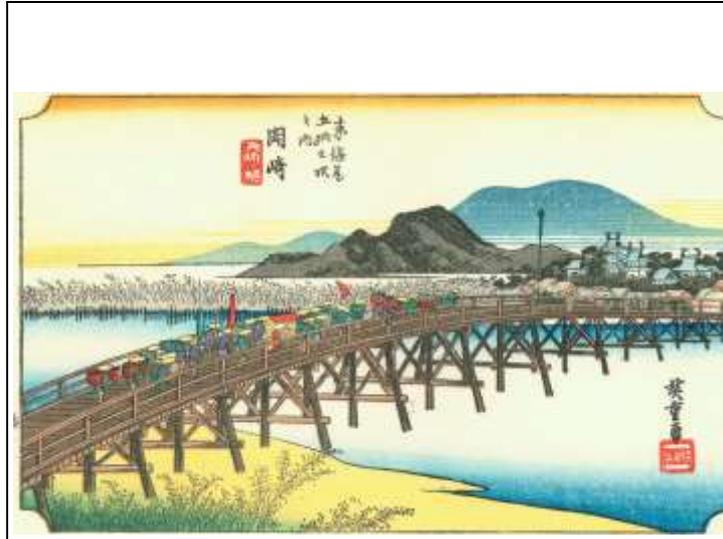
A major land and economic reform was introduced by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1573 when his administration conducted Japan's first national **cadastral survey**.

Under this initiative every parcel of arable Japanese land was measured, not just in terms of its geographical size and location, but more importantly in terms of its **annual yield**.

All rural land was classified as wet land, dry land, residence land and kitchen gardens. Rice paddies, based on historic records, were graded as superior, medium and inferior, and the amount of rice produced from each cho was now recorded.

Following this massive undertaking, the bakufu central government then issued title documents to those families that had worked their land for generations.

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Notes

Rice taxes were used to fund transport infrastructure as illustrated by the bridge in above slide.

The clever next reform was a revision of the taxation system. Based on the quantity and quality of its arable land, each village was now assessed and required to pay tax via a nominated and fixed number of kokus of rice.

The consequences of the reforms following the national cadastral survey were far reaching. Government officials could now determine for the first time how much annual revenue the Bakufu central government could expect each year and budget its expenditure accordingly. At the lower end of the social hierarchy, the tax (amount of rice) now collected at a village level was pre-determined and that amount was fixed.

As a consequence farmers in the Tokugawa period felt encouraged to seek ways to increase their production, as any extra rice they could produce in future would no longer be taxed. This reform enabled many farmers to break out of the subsistence lifestyle trap in which the Japanese social hierarchy had previously trapped them.

Knowing that they would no longer be penalized for their initiatives, farmers in this era were for the first time able to produce surpluses, and began to save portion of the proceeds and thereby gradually build considerable wealth over the years.

The fact that successful farmers would accumulate considerable wealth and would eventually be ONE key factor in overturning Japan's strict feudal hierarchy social which had ordered that society for hundreds of years.

A second key factor relating to alterations in the social structure derived from the changed role of the Samurai warrior class, which will be the subject of a separate discussion.

The Contribution of Rice to Japanese Group Culture



Notes

Because of the multiple tasks involved with wet rice cultivation it was a labour-intensive process that required considerable co-ordination.

As a result, village family units were required to pool their labour, and to also share their water resources and irrigation facilities.

Typically, irrigation arrangements called for water to run downhill, linking all the surrounding families with their shared destiny of communal resource usage.

Further, people lived in houses clustered together in small villages and depended heavily upon each other since the rice was usually planted on the same day after several days of intensive watering.

These activities necessitated an emphasis on group interests, the enhancement of skills in group decision-making and the avoidance of friction between families who would be neighbours and workmates for generations.

Psychologists today have identified a number of commonly observed psychological characteristics in the lives of modern Japanese.

One of the characteristics still to be seen with Japanese people today is strong sense of belonging to the 'group' or 'communality'.

This value refers especially to the family, but also refers to one's school, place of employment, and any other long-enduring group to which one belongs.

It is an interesting possibility that this character feature of communality and group may have derived from behaviours that could also be observed in ancient villages whose farmers exhibited very similar behaviours in their rice production activities.