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It's Planting Season for Rice Paddies

– The Thing that Gave Birth to Japan

One month after the start of a new school year or the start of new jobs for newly graduated students, “May disease” hits some people. While students in new classes and freshly minted *salarymen* get tired of trying to attune themselves to their new environment, tiny green rice seedlings are planted in perfect order on water-laden paddy fields. May is also known as *sa-tsuki* in Japanese. *Sa* of *sa-tsuki* is also the first Japanese character in *sa-nae*, which means young rice plant. *Tsuki* means “moon” or “month.” So, the Japanese word for May indicates it's the month for rice planting.

Today, as rice is staple food and the only crop Japan is self-sufficient in, rice paddies are seen all over the country during the time of the year.

That wasn't always so, however. When rice plants were first introduced to Japan around 10 B.C., neither Japanese soil nor the climate was suitable for rice paddies. Japanese farmers devoted all their energy to improvement of soil and cultivation methods. Rice fields must retain water, and thus natural dams played a role for rice planting in Japan, a land of mountains and steep slopes. Thanks to rice paddies, the people in the Japanese archipelago were able to settle and, in time, formed a nation.

The importance of the rice crop in Japan can be seen in the usage of the Chinese character 田, an ideogram of four squared farms. Japanese people have come to use the word specially for rice paddies, coining a separate Chinese character for non-rice farm fields. As rice has been cultivated throughout the Japanese history, many places and households in Japan carry 田 in their names. If the pronunciation of a Japanese name ends with *ta* or *da*, it's safe to assume that the name carries the 田 character. For example, the Japanese automaker TOYOTA (豊田) means a rich rice paddy, and HONDA (本田) means the main paddy.

Japanese farmers hold a big festival on the day of planting. Young women planting rice seedlings wear a sedge hat and an indigo-colored *kimono*, its sleeves tucked up by a long bright red band. They worked rhythmically, singing rice-planting songs to the drumbeat performed by young men. It is believed that God came down from mountains and settled in the paddies, inspired by the lively music and vividly colored costume. Of course, rice planting is tough work, but people find it joyful with music and the get-together of young men and young women. Today, rice seedlings are planted mostly by tractor, and rice-planting festivals have more or less died out.

Rice-planting festivals that remain have lost their original meaning; some are performed both as a tourist attraction and for regional revitalization. If you catch “May depression,” go to a rural area, experience rice planting and maybe catch a rice-planting festival. Feel the tender and silky mud on your bare feet, and you will get your own natural rhythm back.

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