

Rice, Agriculture, and the Food Supply in Premodern Japan. By Charlotte von Verschuer. Translated and Edited by Wendy Cobcroft. Routledge, New York. 356 pp.

Eugene N. Anderson^{1*}

¹Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA.

*eugene.anderson@ucr.edu

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The author summarizes the aim of this book as “to situate irrigated rice cultivation in the overall context of the crops grown in premodern Japan. We have put forward a number of facts regarding the coexistence of rice growing and dry cereal cultivation, the practice of swidden farming, the gathering of plant foods, the relative proportion of cultivated and wild plants in the diet, and finally the cultural portrayal of rice and the other cereals” (296).

The role of rice in Japan has been controversial. In general, the Japanese have privileged its importance, and the importance of irrigation. They have considered rice as Japan's staple, and even as Japan's “self” (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, a work not cited by von Verschuer). A long-standing countercurrent has pointed out that many other foods were important over time, notably foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*), common millet (*Panicum miliaceum*), barnyard millet (*Echinochloa crus-galli*), wheat, barley, buckwheat, and soybeans. A vast number of roots, tubers, leaves, seeds, nuts, fruits, and other products also contributed. Animal food was always rare, except for fish along coasts. This counter-narrative has been well known for some time in the west, even in some popular works (e.g., Frédéric 1973), but most people, Japanese and western, likely continue to think of Japan as rice-dependent.

Charlotte von Verschuer has analyzed the evidence and found that rice has been important since the dawn of Japanese civilization, but provided only about one-quarter of the total food supply depending on the period, region, and conditions. She stresses the frequency in older sources of the “five grains” (in fact

the book has a Chinese subtitle meaning “five grains in cultural transformation” or “the five grains in history”). “Five Grains” is a traditional Chinese phrase, borrowed by Japan some 1,500 years ago or more, that can mean any mix of rice, millets, wheat, barley, and soybeans. Early ceremonies for the Emperor and the gods used various mixes of plant foods. Overly generalizing translations of texts from as early as the 13th century led to privileging rice over the other grains.

In the process of reviewing rice in Japanese history, von Verschuer provides a dense, statistics-packed work drawing on every line of evidence from archaeology and ethnography to poetry and folksong. Japanese of premodern times ate, drank, and breathed poetry, and most of it used images from nature and agriculture. Almost every crop and cultivation process is mentioned somewhere, often in short poems that lament the writer's situation in a rural setting far from his or her true love.

Von Verschuer covers every aspect of agriculture in exhaustive detail, from the latest archaeological investigations to modern swiddening. Apparently the practice of swiddening was once important and widespread, but survives now only as re-enactments of past practices for tourists. She is particularly detailed on medieval agriculture: technology, crops, yields, milling and preparation, social contexts, everything. One can learn when cotton was introduced (799 CE), how rice was taken off the ear (by pulling sheaves between chopsticks—a slow and laborious process), and which wild plants were gathered. The book is extremely dense with factual



detail. An appendix lists 144 species of plants that were important food or industrial crops. Scientific names (sometimes obsolete) as well as names in Japanese, English, French, and German are provided. They include some items new to me, including *Notbosmyrnium japonicum*, a carrot-family plant that was apparently an important food in the old days.

Outside of the few obsolete scientific names, this book is highly accurate and up-to-date, and provides a thorough survey of the field. Anyone interested in

East Asian food, ethnobotany, or agriculture needs to have this book on their shelf as a reference.

References Cited

- Frédéric, L. 1973. *Daily Life in Japan at the Time of the Samurai, 1185-1603*. E.M. Lowe, trans. Charles E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo, Japan.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, E. 1993. *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.