



The History of Japanese Rice

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Ages: 12–13 years old
Level: Beginning
Culture: Understanding of the origin and the significance of rice in Japanese society; proper table manners when eating rice
Japanese: *Kanji* for rice; rice-related vocabulary; *itadakimasu* and *gochisōsama deshita*



Objectives

I teach a nine-week Japanese and culture class to seventh graders. One of these weeks, I dedicate to the teaching of the rich history and uniqueness of Japanese cuisine. Students learn about the history of common Japanese dishes, exotic Japanese vegetables, rules regarding the preparation of Japanese food, proper table manners, and much more. This particular 50-minute lesson introduces students to the history of rice, the staple food of Japan. Students learn the importance that rice has played in Japanese society, as well as the history of this tiny grain and the many different ways in which Japanese cuisine prepares it. At the end of the lesson, students enjoy a warm and delicious bowl of Japanese *gohan* and are allowed to top it with *furikake*. They get to eat with *hashi* and truly have a marvelous time in class!

I selected this aspect of Japanese culture because most students enjoy eating and experiencing foods that they do not generally have the opportunity of tasting. Most importantly, however, I chose this topic because I felt that a majority of my American students had many stereotypes regarding not only Japanese food but Japanese culture that needed to be corrected.

For example, if you asked a student what they thought of when they heard "Japanese food," most would say "Yuck, they eat dogs and cats," or they would say, "Oh, they chow mein all the time."

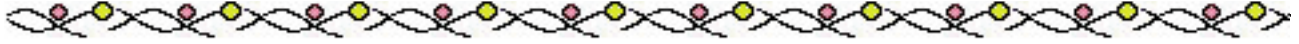
With all of my heart, I desired for my students to learn about the origin of some Japanese foods; in particular, I thought that teaching them about the

history of rice would be a fun and creative approach in which to achieve this goal. I believed that if students learned about the history of rice, its different uses and names in Japanese cuisine, they would personally recognize and correct some of their stereotypes regarding Japan.

From this plan, students learn to better appreciate Japanese culture and come to understand the role that this country's rich history has played in the area of Japanese cuisine. Prior to this lesson, many students have the incorrect notion that all Asian food is the same. They are not able to differentiate between Chinese, Thai, or Japanese foods. After they study my lesson, students develop an awareness for Asian cuisine in general. They no longer believe that Japanese people eat dogs and cats, for example, nor do they cling to the false belief that the only thing that Japanese people consume is raw fish.

At a time when such a diverse Asian population is entering American society, I feel that it is crucial for young people to develop a better understanding of who these individuals are. All too often, students do not have the opportunity of meeting people of other ethnic backgrounds and for this reason have a tendency to form their own views of how people of other cultures live. The environment in which these children are raised directly affects how they come to regard people of various cultures.

In my class, I have the immense joy of being able to educate young people and of enabling them to correct some of the negative beliefs that may exist regarding Japanese and other Asian groups. Through my lessons, students come to the realization that just



because Asian people may physically resemble one another does not mean that they are identical. Students come to realize that each group is quite different and unique.

Materials

- chopsticks for each student (You may purchase them at a local Asian food store. Students should have been taught how to use *hashi* before class)
- Japanese-style rice (*Botan* and *Kohoku* brands are available)
- Japanese bowl (If you do not have these, you may use plastic bowls)
- furikake* (Various flavors are available at local Asian food stores. You may even try buying *otsukemono*. Kids might enjoy this!)
- *ocha* (If possible, make Japanese *ocha* so that kids may drink it. Get cups)

Procedure

A. Teaching Instructions

1. Review each handout prior to distributing to the students.
2. Make sure that there is enough material for each student.
3. a positive attitude and encourage students to try different flavors of *furikake*!

B. Development

1. Introduce students to the history of Japanese rice. Read with the students and discuss. How is Japanese rice different from American rice? (Handout #1)
2. Teach students how to write the *kanji* for rice. Show students on the board, then allow practice time. (Handout #2)
3. Discuss the various terms given to rice in Japanese cuisine. (Handout #3)
4. Have students complete activity sheet in class. (Handout #4)
5. Discuss oldest ceremonial food *mochi*.

(Handout #5)

6. Discuss rice rules and table manners. (Handout #6)
7. Practice what you have learned! Have each student enjoy a bowl of *gohan*.

C. Handouts

#1 Japanese Rice

The History:

In the Japanese language, the word for rice that is ready for eating is *gohan*. The literal translation for this word is "honorable food." This is an indication of the great esteem in which this simple grain is held.

Many centuries ago, rice was not only the most important element of the Japanese diet, but it actually took the place of money. The powerful feudal lords were ranked according to the amount of rice they controlled and possessed. In fact, even after money had entered the Japanese economy, *samurai* warriors were paid not in gold, silver or copper, but in fixed amounts of rice.

It is ironic that for a very long time the small-scale farmer who produced the rice almost never could afford to eat enough of the precious grain. Perhaps this is why even today it is considered ill-mannered to leave rice in one's bowl. By the Edo era (1603–1868), it became possible for the common people to gain a larger share of rice. It was not until shortly before World War II, however, that a system of control and distribution made rice available on an equitable basis to rich and poor.

The Grain:

The Japanese prefer white rice over unpolished rice because of its smoother texture, lighter taste, and digestibility. Today, short-grain white rice, steamed until fluffy, is served as an important part of virtually all traditional Japanese dishes. In contrast to the Western preference for the long-grain, non-glutinous Indian type of rice, Japanese rice is sticky, which lends itself to handling with chopsticks. It can also be molded into rice balls called *onigiri*.



#2 Kanji Practice

Study the character for rice, 米. Practice writing it on the attached practice sheet. Remember to follow the correct stroke order when writing your character.

- () g. Boiled rice
- () h. Vinegared rice used for *sushi*
- () i. Rice gruel
- () j. Red rice

#3 The Various Terms Used for Rice

You can say that rice is to Japan what tortillas and beans are to Mexico and what bread is to people in other parts of the world. In fact it is hard to imagine Japan without rice. Not only is rice the major element in Japanese meals, it is also the major crop grown in the country.

Gohan is the Japanese word for cooked rice (or meal), and *kome* is the Japanese word for uncooked a rice. When the Japanese purchase *kome* they usually ask for *okome*. You can remember that "o" is a prefix which signifies honor. Thus, *okome* means "honorable rice."

But these are not the only terms used for rice. In fact, in Japanese cuisine, the following terms are also used to describe rice:

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|-----------------------|------|-----|
| 1. <i>shinmai</i> | しんまい | 新米 |
| 2. <i>raisu</i> | ライス | |
| 3. <i>genmai</i> | げんまい | 玄米 |
| 4. <i>sushi-meshi</i> | すしめし | 寿司飯 |
| 5. <i>okayu</i> | おかゆ | お粥 |
| 6. <i>okoge</i> | おこげ | |
| 7. <i>meshi</i> | めし | |
| 8. <i>sekihan</i> | せきはん | 赤飯 |

#4 Activity Sheet

After discussing the terms in Handout #3, try and see if you can match the words for rice which appear below with their corresponding meanings. (The teacher will go over the answers.)

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|-----------------------|---|
| 1. <i>gohan</i> | () a. Fresh rice from harvest |
| 2. <i>shinmai</i> | () b. Uncooked rice |
| 3. <i>genmai</i> | () c. Boiled rice served as a side dish with non-Japanese food |
| 4. <i>raisu</i> | |
| 5. <i>kome</i> | () d. General name for rice; also means "meal" |
| 6. <i>meshi</i> | |
| 7. <i>okoge</i> | () e. Brown rice, means "dark rice" |
| 8. <i>sekihan</i> | |
| 9. <i>okayu</i> | () f. Scorched rice (on bottom of pan) |
| 10. <i>sushimeshi</i> | |

Answer key (for teacher only): 1.d/g 2.a 3.e 4.c 5.b 6.d/g 7.f 8.j 9.i 10.h

#5 Mochi : Food for Special Occasions

The oldest ceremonial food is *mochi*. The honorific form is *omochi*. These are rice cakes made from glutinous rice in barrel-sized wooden mortars with a large wooden mallet. The rice is scooped up and patted into rounds of various sizes. Even though *mochi* may be eaten year-round, they are a very common food prepared and enjoyed for the New Year (*Oshōgatsu*) festivities.

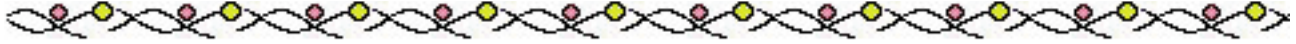
Today, most *mochi* are machine-processed and sold ready-made. These are available in American stores and usually come in packaged squares or in sheet form. If they are made fresh, they will either be in round cakes or in sheet form, too.

The usual way of eating *mochi* is simply to grill and eat it with a flavor complement such as a soy sauce dip or a wrapper of toasted *nori*. When grilled, *mochi* will double in size, and a crisp skin will form. The same principles apply to grilling *mochi* as to marshmallows: Do not let it blacken, but a crisp, well-browned skin is delicious.

#6 Table Manners and Rice Rules

(Teacher will explain to students.)

- a. It is customary to say, "*Itadakimasu*" before eating. This is a type of greeting that expresses a person's appreciation for being given food.
- b. Rice bowls are placed on the left-hand side on the table.
- c. When serving rice, put at least 2 scoops in the bowl, unless you are at a funeral. One single scoop per serving is customarily used at funerals.
- d. When rice is being served, take up your empty bowl with both hands.
- e. After the rice is served, place it on table before eating it.
- f. Hold the rice bowl with four fingers on the bottom together and not spread out. Thumb rests



- lightly on the brim.
- g. Don't use your own chopsticks when helping yourself from a serving dish. If there are no extra chopsticks, either request an extra pair or use the top of your own.
 - h. Never stick chopsticks into food when not in use.
 - i. Never stick one chopstick into a bowl of rice in upright position. You do this when someone dies.
 - j. If you'd like a second serving say, "*Okawari kudasai.*"
 - k. The server will know you have finished eating your rice if you leave no grains of rice in your bowl.
 - l. After eating it is customary to say, "*Gochisōsama-deshita.*" This means "I have been given quite a feast!"

Now it's time for you to practice what you have learned. Let's enjoy a delicious bowl of *gohan* with *furikake*! *Itadakimasu!*

Student Response

One of the strongest attributes of my lesson is that the students realize just how much I respect, love, and admire the Japanese language, culture, and people. My genuine emotions for Japan positively influence my students, and I believe that they are inspired to want to pursue their studies in this subject.

By developing hands-on activities, students are never bored, and physically experience an aspect of Japanese culture that they usually do not have the opportunity of living. For example, by preparing *gohan* and allowing them to try different kinds of *furikake* as well as using their *hashi*, the students have a wonderful time in class. I know that it is really special for them!

Following are a few of the comments students have written:

"I enjoy learning about Japanese culture and trying the different types of food. I have learned how to say a few words and my little sister would always come home and say to me, 'Tell me some Japanese words,' and when I told her she tried to say them. Japan is a pretty interesting place. I would like to

visit Japan someday. We have learned how to write *kanji*; I'm not as good as some people but I'm not that bad. I enjoy watching movies and videos on Japan and its culture. Japanese class is probably one of my most interesting and joyful class." (KT)

".... And I also learned about different foods and places and things I never knew about. It's good learning to open your heart to all kinds of people instead of stereotyping people by what they look like, etc., and now I know that Chinese food is much different than Japanese food. But I like them both." (BH)

"In Ms. Lopez's Japanese class this year I have learned about the history of Japan's culture. I have learned about how they live, how they get around, and what types of food they eat. We have also tried different types of food such as *sushi*, *onigiri* (rice bowls), *matcha* (green tea), *gohan* (boiled cooked rice) and white rice. We also learned about Japanese characters (*kanji*). We have also learned how to greet one another in the Japanese language (*ohayō gozaimasu*—good morning). (CL)





Culture and the Foreign Language Class

I believe that Japanese culture is the nucleus of the Japanese language. To attempt to teach Japanese solely by concentrating on grammatical rules and other linguistic components of the language is like trying to bake an apple pie without apples! Excuse the analogy, however, it has been my experience that Japanese teachers who rarely focus on the culture of Japan are not very successful in their endeavors.

In the United States, or at least in south Florida, the majority of young Americans know very little about Japan. One of the first activities that I have students do is to draw a map of Japan on a blank sheet of paper. Unfortunately, most 12- and 13-year olds are not able to complete this task. After I show them a large map of Japan and point out where other Asian countries are located, they are better able to understand why China, Korea, and India, for example, have had an impact on Japanese culture. I feel that it is crucial for students to understand that even though other Asian countries have influenced Japan, that Japanese culture, as all cultures, is unique and very exciting to study.

When students learn about *kanji*, they realize that even though the writing system of Japan came from China, the Japanese went on to develop their own syllabaries of *hiragana* and *katakana*. This proves to be incredibly interesting for kids of this age.

In my particular lesson on Japanese cuisine, I allow students to discover on their own that while many Asian foods may share similar vegetables, spices and staples such as rice, Japanese food is

unique, just as all Asian foods are. The introduction to Japanese holidays is also a wonderful way of presenting students with culture as demonstrated through the different foods reserved for these special occasions. In short, it is not only important to introduce students to Japanese culture, but highly difficult to not introduce them to it since it is so connected to the language and every other aspect of Japan.

Cultural understanding and language education are intrinsically bound. In fact, I believe that it is impossible for true language education to occur without simultaneously introducing cultural understanding.

My position as a Japanese teacher has always been one of a mini-ambassador for Japan. The fact that I am a Mexican-American who lived for some time in Japan has enabled me to touch many more groups of students in this country. I have always had the philosophy of "the more, the merrier," especially when it comes to learning cultures and languages. I think that once a person begins to understand that culture is the very essence of why we think, feel, believe, and live as we do, then he or she grows in insurmountable ways.

It has also been my experience as a foreign language teacher not only in the U.S. but in Japan and Greece where I have also lived, that nothing in this universe is more pathetic than an individual who refuses to allow other cultures and languages into his life. The more cultures and languages a person is open to, the more that person will be able to live life to its fullest and experience the incredible world that we inhabit.



Comments from the Feedback Committee

Educating for Cross-cultural Understanding

I especially appreciate the fact that Ms. Lopez-Richter connects Japan with other Asian countries; it is important for students to know that Japan and Japanese culture are not isolated entities, but rather are connected to other Asian cultures. Too many Japanese teachers are eager to emphasize that Japan is unique whereas Ms. Lopez-Richter more accurately defines Japanese culture as unique in the sense that all cultures have unique elements. It is also important that she presents Japanese cuisine within the context of Asian foods, sharing some elements but having some unique flavors. It is equally interesting that she finds a way to correct stereotypes regarding food within the context of the lesson, addressing the problem of many high school students thinking that all Japanese eat only *sushi* or that Japanese food is the same as Chinese.

Language Learning

The lesson plan is easy to understand, specific in its goals, and well organized and presented. The functional objectives are clearly indicated, and it is easy to see how these objectives would be met via the handouts and overall teaching plan. With the specificity regarding materials needed and teacher preparation, even a novice teacher could successfully use this lesson.

The handouts are well designed for middle school students. They are short enough to keep their attention while they are thorough in the information provided. Handout #5, *Mochi: Food for Special Occasions*, is probably fun for the students to read since *mochi* is compared to roasting marshmallow. Such comparisons are a good way for young students to grasp a foreign culture. Handout #6, *Table Manners and Rice Rules*, is especially vital to this lesson and to an overall understanding. It provides a direct application of the language learned to the context of actually

eating rice and using the newly learned vocabulary, effectively showing manners and traditions as an important part of language learning.

More Japanese can be integrated into the lesson. By clarifying how the lesson plan treats listening, speaking, reading and writing, it would create a much more solid link between language and culture.

Other words that are used often in this lesson for which you could provide *kanji* and *hiragana* are:

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|-----------------------|----------|
| 1. <i>hashi</i> | はし(箸) |
| 2. <i>chawan</i> | ちゃわん(茶碗) |
| 3. <i>ocha</i> | おちゃ(お茶) |
| 4. <i>furikake</i> | ふりかけ |
| 5. <i>itadakimasu</i> | |

Whether the students can read or write these words in Japanese is beside the point. It is important simply to get students used to seeing Japanese. When you say each word, point to it on the board; after numerous repetitions, students will subconsciously begin to link the sound and the characters.

Introducing the *kanji* for rice fits in naturally with this lesson. The students would probably find it very interesting to know that another word for America is *beikoku*, 米國, literally meaning "rice country." Giving the students this kind of information may interest them further in *kanji*.

For further reference, there is a fun book entitled *Onigiri* (by Hirayama, Eizo and Hirayama, Kazuko, 1993, Fukuinkan Shoten) with illustrated step-by-step instructions on how to make *onigiri*, written in short Japanese sentences. I don't know if it would be appropriate for students aged 12 to 13, but this kind of book is a very effective tool for language learning because it integrates characters and sounds in a natural way with the activity at hand.