

Culture Notes

Rice

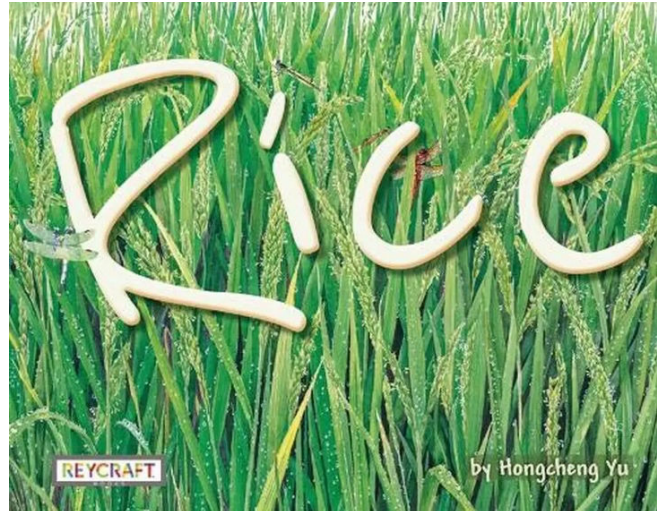
by Hongcheng Yu

Non-Fiction, set in China

Reycraft Books, 2020

2020 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Hongcheng Yu positions *Rice* as a cultural link not only between Chinese rural life and English-speaking audiences but also as a link between rural and urban Chinese people. That is, this book would be conducive to cultural learning experiences in both Chinese and English-speaking classrooms.



For both rural and urban Chinese, rice is a ubiquitous part of the eating experience. Traditionally, the Chinese say that southern people consume rice with every meal while the northern people enjoy a more wheat-based diet (for example, steamed buns and noodles); however, food cultures have long intermingled, and rice is eaten all over China.

Rice is such an essential component of daily eating that the same word is used both for *rice* and for *food* (*fàn*, 饭; pronounced: fann). In fact, every meal of the day involves this word:

Breakfast (*zǎo fàn*, 早饭; pronounced: zow fann)

Lunch (*wǔ fàn*, 午饭; pronounced: woo fann)

Dinner (*wǎn fàn*, 晚饭; pronounced: wann fann)

Because nearly every meal involves rice—in the form of rice flour-based goods, sticky rice treats, rice porridge, or simply and most commonly steamed rice—the Chinese can be very particular about the rice they consume. The region where the rice is grown, the shape and size of the individual grains, these impart flavor and textural differences. One of the most significant factors affecting the variety chosen to eat at home is whether or not it is “new crop” rice, which is considered the freshest and most fragrant.



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Beyond the rice itself, Hongcheng Yu's book is laden with opportunities for further cultural understanding.

Rice Terraces. The farms in this book are set in Yunnan province amid breathtaking rice terrace landscapes, which ripple the hilltops and mountainous regions spanning southern China. The terraces planted in the Longyang region of Guangxi are the most famously visited and photographed. When filled with spring rains, reflecting clouds and sunsets and water buffalo, these step-like planting beds are awe-inspiringly beautiful. To the unfamiliar, that beauty may bely the generations of arduous, backbreaking work which brought them to fruition. A farmer spends his entire working life digging a new terrace into the mountain, while at the same time planting his own rice in the terraces his ancestors had dug before him. He will leave the growing collection of terraces to his own children who in turn will repeat the process for their children.

Qingming Festival (清明节; pronounced: ching ming; see the season of April in the book). In contemporary China, the Festival of Pure Brightness (also known as the Tomb-Sweeping Festival) is not widely observed in its traditional fashion. Still, for those who do observe it (especially in rural China), the festival involves visiting the burial sites of one's ancestors. Family members sweep away debris and clean up the burial site before burning incense, offering fruits and other foods along with white chrysanthemums and prayers. They also burn offerings of imitation paper money and other objects their ancestors might find useful in the afterlife, the idea being that upon burning these objects, the objects then move into the spirit realm.

Hani Minority Ethnic Group. China has fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups. The vast majority of Chinese identify as part of the Han (majority) ethnic group. The community we follow in the book identifies as the Hani (pronounced: ha-knee) ethnic group. We can identify them based on the architectural style of their thatched-roof homes as well as by the clothing they wear throughout the book, and especially by the traditional celebratory clothing they wear in the illustration where they gather to celebrate the October Year Festival (at the end of the book). The Hani are an agricultural people, mostly concentrated in the mountainous region of southern Yunnan, and although they are shown harvesting rice in this book, they are historically known for their tea-cultivating prowess.



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October Year Festival. Spring Festival, celebrated as the lunar new year by the majority Han people, is observed in January or February. Much less widely known is the October Year Festival, which the Hani people celebrate in late October, marking the new year of their own ethnic minority lunar calendar. The entire Hani community engages in a five-to-six-day celebration where they wear eye-catching traditional clothing, parade through town, visit with relatives and neighbors, gather around bonfires, sing traditional music, compete in games and contests, and of course, prepare and share in a great feast of many different time-honored dishes.

Chinese Characters. The author uses red ink to write the characters for the various agriculturally significant seasons, all of which can be found in English on the circular agricultural calendar at the back of the book (p. 32). The characters used for the various seasons follow an older Chinese script, sometimes different from modern simplified Chinese.

雨水 (*yǔ shuǐ*, pronounced: you shway), the rains

惊蛰 (*jīng zhé*, pronounced: jing juh), insects awaken

清明 (*qīng míng*, pronounced: ching ming), pure brightness

立夏 (*lì xià*, pronounced: lee shah), summer begins

小满 (*xiǎo mǎn*, pronounced: show man), grain full

大暑 (*dà shǔ*, pronounced: dah shoo), great heat

立秋 (*lì qiū*, pronounced: lee cheoh), autumn begins

秋分 (*qiū fēn*, pronounced: cheoh fenn), autumn equinox

寒露 (*hán lù*, pronounced: hann loo), cold dew

霜降 (*shuāng jiàng*, pronounced: shwahng jeyong), frost's descent

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