

Similarities in rice production between Japan and China

part 2

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Part one of this two part series can be found on pages 52-54 of the April edition of Milling Grain magazine (use the link or QR code to see the article).

Part 1 focuses on the development of the rice market in Japan and China through the 20th and into the 21st century.

Part 2 considers the evolution of rice as a product, the marketing strategies used and how this affects the consumer.



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In my previous article, I wrote that economic disparity between Japanese farmers and those engaged in other industries arose as the country's economy boosted during the 1970s and that the situation continues, even now.

In this article, I would like to explore the rice industry from a little closer to the consumers view.

As people working in corporate offices became busy with a rapid economic growth during the 1970s, the demand for faster meals has continued to emerge, with one iconic example of this being instant cup noodles.

People working in companies now don't have to line up in the employee cafeteria because they can eat noodles by simply pouring hot water on them and then waiting for three minutes. The invention of the cup noodles had a tremendous impact on Japanese eating style.

Simultaneously, the trend was seen by rice producers and sellers with a mixture of envy and pain. However, there were also people who soon realised that they needed to do something new with the staple food rice, focusing on the convenience aspect, just like the cup noodle has.

Japanese have a long culture of eating boxed lunches (Bento) and rice balls (Musubi). They prepare lunch in the morning at home and take it to the company, school, and so on. Of course, people ate cold rice before microwave became available. What shed light to the situation was the convenience store.

The emergence of the convenience store in Japan

In 1974, Japan's first convenience store opened in Tokyo. The convenience store is a shop that sells literally everything from ice cream to batteries. Among the over three thousand products that a convenience store carries, Musubi and Bento stand out as products that one can buy at the store with distinctive characteristics.

If you look at a convenience store during lunch time in Tokyo, you can find many office workers who buy Bento and Musubi for their short lunch break. In the evening, students buy Bento for dinner. The menu is updated about once every three months to differentiate between convenience store chains. Bento and/or Musubi are definitely magnet-like products to attract customers to the store.

The Japanese convenience stores demanded five essential qualities to the Bento or Musubi at the beginning of this trend; good taste, the same taste at any given time, the same taste at all locations, the same taste at different serving temperatures, and the same taste after heat is re-applied.

The convenience store chain contracted with specific rice-cooking centers to provide their stores with standard taste and quality. Since taste is based on a sensory evaluation, it was required for the cooking centers to train many staff capable of judging the taste on-site.

Furthermore, in order to set a quantitative indicator, they introduced taste measuring equipment. Appearance and interior indicator were also introduced to inspected white rice regularly.

Logistic network was also established to deliver Bento several times a day from the near-by rice cooking center so fresh Bento could be supplied. Thus, convenience stores received support from the upstream rice-cooking industry to meet their consumer's demands.

Meeting convenience store demands for rice

The rice-cooking industry also requested that their upstream, the rice milling industry, adjust their process in order to meet the demands of convenience store customers.

The requirements the rice milling industry received



were a little different to the ones they receive from their normal customers, rice sellers.

For example, glossy finish on rice surface was no longer the important requirement. More important requirement was to remove the excess bran on surface of the rice. It would cause the rice to be burned, resulting in deteriorated taste and complaints from consumers.

Equipped with the request from rice-cooking industry, the Japanese rice millers became aware for the first time that their processes geared to their customer were not necessary a required quality of rice to the consumers.

The convenience store industry has not only changed the Japanese eating style, it has also affected the rice-cooking industry, the rice-milling industry and even the rice farmers - who are now required to provide best quality rice, not quantity. The force behind the convenience store industry was the consumers.

Increasing living standards & disposable income

Is this strong consumer influence seen only in Japan? Maybe for now, but I can predict that the same will happen in many countries in Asia, particularly China, where living standards are rising whilst disposable incomes are increasing.

In Japan, consumers' demands for the rice have changed over time from affordable rice, to tasty rice, to safe rice, to convenient rice, with the focus now shifting to functional rice.

Whilst there seems to be slight differences among countries, I strongly believe the steps of consumer demands or the requirements will apply to many places.

This article explains demands by consumers in Japanese market and changes in the market close to consumers by showing just one example of the relationship between convenience stores and the rice industry.

There are several other cases I desire to introduce to you at another opportunity, such as rinse-free rice, packed rice, GABA rice, etc. Satake develops and provides equipment and facilities to all sectors connected to convenience store chains, rice cooking industry, rice milling industry, and rice farmers.

Since convenience stores were introduced in Japanese market, Satake has been providing solutions to the related industry and its research and development continues in Japan and various regions around the globe.

