

'India and China were the world's richest nations — rice grew their wealth'

Francesca Bray is Professor Emerita of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. Speaking to **Srijana Mitra Das** at *Times Evoke*, she outlines the history of rice — and its workers:

What is the core of your research?

■ Over my career, I've looked at multiple aspects stemming from my original research, which was on the history of agriculture in China. From that came an interest in agrarian networks and social systems linked with these. Gender, with its associated crops, was one such topic — this is when I grew particularly interested in rice.

Does rice represent global commodity networks?

■ Rice is rather special in today's world — wheat and corn are global commodities, bought and sold between countries in greater quantities than usually consumed in their home economies. Rice is an exception — although it has world markets, most rice produced is actually consumed within the societies that grow it. Rice has resisted the large-scale industrial monoculture model and rice fields are still smaller than wheat, soybean or industrial maize. Rice encourages smaller farmers and more diversity of crops and occupations.



Did rice cultivation shape pre-colonial societies?

■ With the ability of its farms to remain small, rice did away with feudal relations — the management of farms by small agriculturalists meant their labour was not directly controlled by a landlord. As long as they paid their rent, they were fine. Secondly, it encouraged small farmers to become entrepreneurs, working at household scale or with local manufacturers and often buying land of their own. In southern China, the notion of wealth growing within generations was strong because people could change their status. In Malaysia, peasants contributed taxes to a king's coffers but they weren't feudal labour — they were independent farmers.

How do you view the characterisation of rice-based economies being slower and less technological than wheat-eating nations?

■ The historian Roy Bin Wong's book 'China



WERE YOU ALWAYS PEARLY? Rice includes harsh realities like colonialism and forced labour



IT'S AT SO MANY LEVELS: Rice, grown in a variety of ways by small farmers, from flat paddies to layered terraces, evolved its own technological development — and sparked entrepreneurship

'Transformed' suggests the principle of symmetrical comparison — instead of saying 'Europe went this way and China and India didn't, so what did they do wrong?', we should ask what people wanted there and whether they were successful at managing it. The south Chinese rice-centred economy actually grew enormously over the centuries, becoming a global powerhouse. It didn't give rise to an Industrial Revolution like England's and mechanisation wasn't big but many systems for raising capital, making it available at a distance, etc., developed there. The 19th century onwards, interactions in the Indian Ocean-Pacific world between Western capitalism and what was supposed to not be capitalism in Asia had several financial systems which came from South India, East Asia and Islamic nations.

India and China were actually the richest economies on Earth — rice was a significant factor in this wealth and the social organisation of businesses around it helped produce capitalism. So, it's not helpful to say, 'They were slow and got overtaken', because if you look in detail at the interactions, there was mutual influence — of course, since the people writing such books were English or Dutch, they preferred to say they were the ones bringing progress.

How did colonialism then impact rice?

■ Rice was an essential product in the rise and expansion of colonialism and the emergence of a global industrial economy — during the colonial era, rice became a cheap staple food for poor workforces around the world. By 1700, rice was the main provision of the slave trade

Taiwan and Korea and taking control of their rice production. Chinese merchants controlled most of the rice trade across Southeast Asia.

The area under rice increased as colonial workforces expanded — by the mid-19th century, new technologies for draining, pumping and levelling meant swampy deltas and flood plains could now be turned into paddy fields. In Indochina, rice industries were set up to feed migrant workers in mines and plantations — in Punjab and Bengal, the British intensified rice systems developed by the Mughals to expand commercial cropping of indigo, cotton and sugarcane. Colonial policies drove the emergence of what the historian Peter Boomgaard calls 'monotonous rice bowls', monocrop zones depending on intensive labour by workers who had little opportunity to diversify or increase their incomes. Typically they were tied down by debt — colonial governments introduced taxes that had to be paid in cash while money-lenders charged high rates of interest. It was in this fertile soil that the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was planted.

What role has gender played in rice?

■ Even between China and Japan, which were very close in many respects, the gender coding of rice cultivation was different. China was a particularly intense example of a gender coding where men were

supposed to be in the fields growing grain and women in the house, weaving cloth. This view dated back to the early imperial period in China and outlived the eventual switch to monetary payment. The notion that men should be out in the fields and women at

home remained fundamental in Chinese political economy and concepts of identity, gender and morality. It seemed to fit with Chinese circumstances since many rice regions in China were textile producers, which did start with women producing the textiles.

As the economy commercialised though, more and more men came into the textile industry which began to expand to workshops outside the home. Meanwhile, in many regions, women were out working in the rice fields — but since this wasn't regarded as 'proper' or 'ideal' women's activity, their hard work was often erased from the history books.



FROM STAPLE TO SPECIAL: Rice is many-splendoured

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America out of the market.

Independent kingdoms in Southeast Asia like Siam (Thailand) also entered the fray and opened new rice frontiers to feed miners, plantation workers and growing urban populations. A latecomer colonial power, Meiji Japan, met its expanding resource needs by annexing



IT'S NOT JUST HIS-STORY: The chronicles of women rice farmers are often wilfully erased

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