What is the Importance of Rice to Asian Culture?

Rice is a staple crop for much of the world’s population today, and is one of the most widespread and used cereal crop in the world, alongside only corn and wheat. Over three billion people rely on rice for sustenance- with about 3.5 billion people depending on rice for more than 20% of their calories. Rice is, and will continue to be, an important crop in Asian culture. Rice is also quickly becoming a staple crop in many other populations around the world, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, where rice is becoming the fastest growing food crop in the area. Rice has had a great historical impact on East Asia, and there are three thresholds necessary to understand the influence of rice as a crop: among these are big history thresholds five, seven, and eight. Nevertheless, rice has been the most influential food crop on East Asian history and culture, growth and eventually, its spread around the world.

To find out the global importance of rice, one must first learn about the history of the rice crop. This is the fifth threshold of big history- what are the origins of rice? Rice dates back many millennia to 8,000 B.C., and there are two general subspecies of the rice which we eat: *indica* and *japonica*. Rice is a ‘grass’ plant, being in the “grass family (Graminae)” (Rice, the Columbia Encyclopedia). Rice has been found in the Ganges River Valley in India and the Yellow River Valley in China from many thousands of years ago. As early as the Han Dynasty, the second imperial dynasty of China which lasted from the second century B.C.E. to the third century A.D., the differences in the two types of rice had already been documented, with the two varieties ‘Hsien’ and ‘Keng’. The ‘Hsien’ variety is equivalent to the *indica* variety whereas the ‘Keng’ variety is equivalent to the *japonica* variety (The Common History of the Domestication of Rice). This shows the heavy study of rice in ancient China, which in turn shows the importance of rice in ancient China, so much so that extensive studies were conducted of the crop, leading to
the discovery of two different kinds of rice many years before the biological taxonomy system was invented.

Through the advent of agriculture over 10,000 years ago that represents threshold 7, the cultural importance of rice on the history of various East Asian cultures becomes vast. Rice has been cultivated in China for thousands of years, and the earliest records for rice cultivation go back over 4,000 years. The integral part of rice in culture is shown with the languages of the countries in which it is predominantly cultivated. In classical Chinese, for example, the “words for agriculture and for rice culture are synonymous” (Rice, the Columbia Encyclopedia), which shows that the Chinese language was developed when rice was already the predominant agricultural product, showing the history of rice and how it predates even Chinese language. In many other countries in Asia, the words for rice and food are identical as well. Furthermore, “many ceremonies have arisen in connection with planting and harvesting rice, and the grain and the plant are traditional motifs in Oriental art” (Rice, the Columbia Encyclopedia). This shows the importance of rice in Asian culture, becoming a key part of the culture of the region, finding its way into art and ceremonies. So vast is the influence of rice on culture and history that it finds its way into the very art, and even religion of East Asia.

Another question that there is about rice is how did it affect the growth of East Asian civilization. In China, for example, five major types of grain are produced, including rice. During the early middle ages, Chinese agriculture become the most dominant in the world. This is likely because rice paddies are one of the “highest-producing types of agriculture” (Early Medieval Chinese Agriculture). High productions of food results in a large food surplus, increasing the specialization of labor in the region, meaning more people in the area can become metalworkers, scientists, or architects. This allows for the growth of culture and population in the region.
Despite rice paddies requiring a lot of labor to maintain, the amount of food produced easily puts off the amount of work required to maintain it. Furthermore, crop rotation would be used to maintain soil fertility. All in all, it is likely that the spread of rice around East Asia results in the large populations in East and Southeast Asia. Rice was able to permanently affect the demographics of an entire continent, showing its importance to the growth of population, and thus the economy and industry of Asia.

The final question regarding rice lies in Threshold 8, the modern evolution. How was rice able to spread around the world? Despite the prevalence of rice in China and India, and how it affected the population in those nations, over half the world today relies on rice for sustenance today. As a result, rice must have spread to other nations. For example, “rice words in several west African language families (malo, maro, mano, etc.) predate the Portuguese-derived words associated with Asian rice” (The Common History of the Domestication of Rice). This shows that rice was in Africa prior to the Portuguese, the first European explorers of Africa. Therefore, rice was present in Africa prior to the Europeans, showing that rice had migrated independently all the way from East Asia to Africa.

To take it back a step, the spread of rice around the whole Asian continent is shown by excavation and archaeological sites all throughout East and South Asia. It is found that rice had reached “South Korea by 1000 BC, and Yayoi period Japan from 800 BC”, and “spread southwards to Southeast Asia by c.2000 BC” (The Early Rice Project: From Domestication to Global Warming). The spread of rice throughout Asia is most likely why Asia has such a high concentration of people who rely on rice. Rice is also able to be eaten in the cold environments of Canada and Russia through the new ability to preserve rice crops. After rice is harvested, it is dried and stored in freezers. In this state, rice can remain edible for one hundred years (What
Happens After Harvest?). This allows for rice to be transported all around the world for sale and consumption, even to places far from fertile rice paddies, such as Siberia or the Sahara.

Some people may argue that another crop, like wheat, is the most influential crop in Asia. Wheat is the most important crop in Siberia and Central Asia, the middle east and Persia, and “Grain Crops, chiefly wheat, are cultivated in North China… and Japan” (Asia - Agriculture). However, wheat, and other grain crops, lack the cultural influence that rice has. Rice, not wheat, is what had a greater influence on East Asian culture. Although wheat may be the dominant crop in certain parts of Asia, it is only in places where rice cannot be grown. Central Asia, North China and the middle east are generally either arid or cold places, not suitable for rice growth. Wherever rice can be grown, like in Southeast or Eastern Asia, it is the dominant crop, not wheat. This shows how, despite wheat being a dominant crop, it is generally only in area where rice cannot be grown, and the effects of rice on Asian culture is much greater than that of wheat, or any other grain crop.

Rice was, and still is, crucial to mankind’s growth. It allowed the population boom in India and China, resulting in them being the most populous countries today. Furthermore, its spread around the world resulted in it being a staple crop across multiple continents, from China all the way to Africa. The cultural impact of the crop is also something to be marveled. The ability for the world rice to become synonymous with the word agriculture in so many languages shows the importance of rice many thousands of years ago during the development of languages. As a result, rice is now one of the most widely-used and important crops in the world, used by over half the world’s population. Due to having great crop yields, perhaps it may become a more sustainable and reliable food source for our planet’s growing population.

Rice dates back many millennia to 8000 B.C. It is the main source of calories for many millions of people worldwide. Archaeologists have found rice grains dating many millennia in the Yangzi River Basin in China, and ceramic engravings of rice have been found in Nigeria. There are two main types of rice- Asian and African. Furthermore, differences between the indica and japonica subspecies of rice have been dated back to the Han Dynasty. Rice has also been found in the Ganges River Valley dated from 7000-5000 B.C., and has been found in the Yellow River Basin dated from 3000-2000 B.C.

This can help my search as it gives me background into the origins of rice. It tells me where rice came from and what species of rice there are. I learned that there are many groups and subspecies of rice, and rice has been domesticated all around the world, in both Asia and Africa. It has been domesticated from Nigeria to India, albeit being different forms of rice. This tells me where rice grows, and since when has it been grown.

The source is from an Oxford Academic Journal. This makes it very credible as Oxford is a prestigious university, and this source was published by them. Furthermore, the work was cited by almost 300 people, meaning it is a very popular source, giving it more credibility. Furthermore, this work was found on the ProQuest Research Database, which shows that it’s more credible.

Rice has been cultivated in China since ancient times. It has been introduced to India since before the time of the Greeks. In fact, in China, the words for agriculture and rice culture are the same, showing the importance of rice in Chinese history. Furthermore, in several Asian languages, the words for food and rice are synonymous. The rice crop migrated over thousands of years to West Africa, then to the New World through the Carolinas. Rice is in the division Magnoliophyta of the plant kingdom, and is in the family Graminae (the grass family). It is in the genus Oryza.

This can help my search as it, like the first source, gives me background into the origins of rice. It tells me the taxonomic classification of rice, and it tells me the spread of the rice crop across the world. It shows how rice spread slowly from China, across Asia, then finally to Africa and America. Furthermore, it shows the integration of rice into the cultures of Asia, where in many countries food is synonymous with rice.

This source is from a history research database called Credo Reference. This means that it is a credible, reviewed source. Furthermore, the source originates from Columbia University, a prestigious college, which means the article will be of high quality.

“What Happens after Harvest?” Ricepedia, CGIAR, ricepedia.org/rice-as-a-crop/what-happens-
after-harvest.

After harvest, rice is dried. This is critical to the preservation of the rice crop. Next, they are stored in freezers at -18 degrees Celsius. In these freezers, rice can remain edible for a hundred years. This is used to minimize lose to rodents, and use the space efficiently. Next, the rice is milled. This is to remove the husk of the rice, which makes the rice free of impurities. If only the husk is removed, it is brown rice. If it is further polished, it is white rice. Finally, it is transported to other points of sale.

This helps my search as it provides background into how rice is transported around the world. It tells me how rice is stored prior to transport- in -18-degree Celsius conditions until it is transported to other points of sale. This tells me how rice, despite being grown in more tropical areas, can be transported to a place like Canada or Russia.

This source is from the CGIAR, which is a global partnership that fights against hunger. The website I found it on is an authority regarding rice, and describes the importance of rice as a crop and how it is processed. This makes it a reliable source regarding the usage and preservation of rice.


In China, there are five main types of grain produced, including rice. Chinese agriculture was the most productive in the world at the time. In China, much of the land was produced for the usage of rice paddies. Rice paddies produce a lot of grain, but require lots of labor to maintain.
Still, rice paddies were planted biannually, and crop rotation was used between rice and another grain crop to maintain soil fertility.

This helps my search as it shows the importance of rice to the development of civilization. Despite rice being extremely labor-intensive to grow, it is still commonly grown around the world. This is because rice produces a lot of grain, allowing there to be a greater food surplus. As a result, rice continues to be grown, as it is a reliable and large source of food and nutrition, at the cost of being labor-intensive. This, of course, most likely has had an effect in the growth of major population centers in East and Southeast Asia, where rice has been cultivated for thousands of years.

This source is from the ABC-Clio database. This is a world history database and is thus a very accurate source for reliable information on this topic. As the topic I am researching is regarding rice and its impact on civilization, this world history database is a perfect source for information on the topic.


Many Asian countries and civilizations use rice as a staple product. Early rice was grown in artificial wet rice paddies. Domestication was underway by 4,600 B.C., and was most likely completed by 3,000 B.C. Rice had spread to South Korea by 1,000 B.C., then to Japan by 800 B.C. Another subspecies of rice, the *indica* species, originates from India. In contrast to Chinese-grown rice, the ancient Indians cultivated rice through natural river flooding and monsoons. Rice
produces greater crop yields than other crops, but also produces more methane. This allows historians to be able to track the spread of rice through methane levels.

This article can help my research as it allows me to learn and know how rice spreads around the world. This helps me see the origins and the spread of rice around the world. It shows how the two Asian species of rice have spread to neighboring countries, and why rice is such a dominant crop in Asian culture and diet.

This source is from an archaeology institute. This makes it a very reliable source as my topic involves agricultural history. Furthermore, it comes from the London University, a university. This means that the source is most likely reviewed and approved. Finally, the article has been cited by 13 people, showing that it is a popular source that has been used before.


The Asian continent produces a massive variety of different fruits and vegetables. The most important ones are rice and wheat, as well as tea and sugarcane. Only a small amount of land there is cultivated due to unfavorable soil conditions, but land that is able to be cultivated are used for a plethora of food production, and can be used to make massive amounts of food.

This article helps my research as it shows the most important Asian crops, and it shows a comparison between rice and wheat which is usable in the counterargument. The importance of wheat and rice can be compared, and I can show how rice is, in the end, more important than wheat to Asian civilization.
This source is from the Encyclopedia Britannica, which is a reliable and old encyclopedia, and is good for finding quality, reviewed information. It is quite certain that the information put onto the encyclopedia is correct, and has been reviewed and fact-checked.