

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 1: Geography: The Village, Farm, and Rice

Viewing: Tune in Japan: Approaching Culture Through Television, 1995

Seven Samurai, 1954, Kurosawa

The Japanese Farmer, 1987, The Faces of Japan I

Rice Farmer, 1988, The Faces of Japan II

Suggested Reading: "Rice: It's More Than Food in Japan," 1993, Linda S. Wojtan, is available online.

Suggested grades: 9-12, one to three classes.

The central idea:

Tradition and change. Rice represents the "kokoro," the heart and soul of Japan's culture, not only the basic source of food but also the historical nucleus of the traditional village, the system of water sharing from the mountains to sea, and the spirit of cooperation and harmony in the Japanese people. But this heritage as also the place of rice in Japanese culture is changing.

Teaching:

The first fourteen minutes of Tune In Japan provides a montage of traditional and modern images followed by a concise but effective lesson in the five themes of geography. This can lead into the study of rice as an important cultural theme from historic to present day Japan. The opening eight minutes of *Seven Samurai* focuses in on a 16th-century rural village of rice farmers. They must defend their essential food supply from marauding bandits. But Kurosawa gives us much more than the plot. In the village circle with almost all of the men, women, and children present, we see a symbol of the traditional Japanese village and its group process of facing problems and decision making. When one dissenter in frustration leaves the circle, he goes only a little beyond the perimeter. Another man, concerned to resolve this group conflict as well as the problem of the bandits, proposes they all go to the village wiseman, an acknowledgment of the role of the aged and past experience in village affairs. The old man's solution is to find hungry samurai who, for rice, will help the villagers defend themselves. (It is interesting to note that in Japanese history the first samurai retainers in the service of the daimyo were paid not in gold but in rations of rice.)

What follows in the over three hour film classic is the search for noble samurai who will take up their cause and lead the battle against the forty bandits. For the purpose of this lesson, however, the final ten minutes of the film (from the point where the samurai leader says "There are only thirteen left. Let them all in.") allows us to see the concluding battle followed by the victorious farmers all returning to the joyful ritual of rice planting. In an ironic reference to Japan's postwar attitude toward militarism, the surviving samurai leader says, "The winners are the farmers. Not us." The final image is a silhouette of the graves of the samurai who died defending the farmers. These two clips and Kurosawa's image/symbols can lead to the discussion of village-life, farming,

and rice traditions of historic Japan.

To bring the rice issue into the present, two 27-minute docudramas, *The Japanese Farmer* and *Rice Farmer*, reveal the plight of today's farmers. The recent changes in the government's policies of price support and import restrictions has weakened the position of farmers to the point they may not be able to continue. In a country which already imports over 53% of its food, this is a serious blow. Further, with the decline of rice farming in Japan, the continuation of rice as a cultural and spiritual symbol of Japan must give away to the new values of a changing Japan.

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