



How the Emperor Governs the Nation: Discourse on Rice Cultivation and Biopolitics

Di Yang

Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing 210054, Jiangsu, China.

How to cite this paper: Di Yang. (2024) How the Emperor Governs the Nation: Discourse on Rice Cultivation and Biopolitics. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(12), 2701-2705.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.12.008

Received: November 12, 2024

Accepted: December 9, 2024

Published: January 6, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Di Yang, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing 210054, Jiangsu, China.

Abstract

Focusing on the discourse of rice cultivation, this study examines the symbolic and political functions of rice within the governance of the Japanese imperial state, drawing on Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Agamben's theory of the state of exception. Rice, as a high-yield and sedentary agricultural practice, not only supported social prosperity but also legitimized imperial rule through mythological narratives, religious rituals, and discourses of power. The discourse of rice cultivation reinforced the division between "normal" life and the "state of exception" in political governance, incorporating non-rice-cultivating groups into a system of exclusionary control while serving as a symbolic tool for imperial expansion. By analyzing cases of ancient monarchy and modern colonial governance—such as the management of the Ainu, the Truku people, and non-rice-cultivating populations in Korea—this paper reveals how the discourse of rice cultivation was embedded within the power structure of the Emperor system. Through the normalization of lifestyles and governance via the state of exception, it facilitated national integration and territorial expansion, offering new insights into the mechanisms of imperial power in Japan.

Keywords

Homo sacer; Biopolitics; Imperial system; Rice cultivation; Kojiki myths

1. Introduction

There are lots of articles that explore the significance of rice cultivation in ancient Japanese agriculture and culture. Huang asserts that Japan's interpersonal relationships align individual and group interests, grounded in the communal consciousness of rice cultivation, highlighting its crucial role in shaping family values and social cohesion (Huang & Huang, 2020). Li discusses the ongoing debate among scholars in China and Japan regarding the origins and diffusion of rice culture, highlighting various theories without consensus, particularly noting the prominence of the Yangtze River basin origin theory (Li, 2021). Qian Lulu's work emphasizes the introduction and localization of rice cultivation technology, highlighting its historical influence on Chinese traditional agriculture and the unique rice cultivation system that developed in Japan (Qian & Ye, 2022).

This paper investigates the symbolic functions of rice culture in the context of Japanese imperial governance, using Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's state of exception as theoretical frameworks. It situates biopolitical thought within its historical evolution, beginning with late 19th-century philosophies like Bergson's vitalism, Spengler's cultural "organicism," and Nietzsche's will-to-power, which influenced political discourse in the 1920s. Thinkers like Kjellén viewed the nation-state as a "living organism," reframing political and social issues as biological concerns. This perspective justified practices such as eugenics and the exclusion of perceived "diseased" groups, culminating in the violent biopolitical policies of Nazi Germany. These associations discredited biopolitics until Foucault

redefined the concept in 1976.

Foucault characterized biopolitics as a mechanism of micro-power distinct from sovereign authority, focusing on the regulation and normalization of life to create “docile bodies.” His framework politicized biological life (*zoe*) by integrating it into structured political existence (*bios*). In contrast, Agamben conceptualized biopolitics as an enduring archetype embedded in the history of human sovereignty. For Agamben, sovereignty operates by establishing zones of exception, where *zoe* is stripped from *bios*, reducing individuals to *homo sacer*—bare life exposed to sovereign power. Agamben's framework highlights how sovereignty renders individuals subject to both inclusion and exclusion within the political order.

Building on these theories, this paper examines how rice culture, centered on the Japanese Emperor, functioned as a biopolitical tool. It explores the dual dynamics of Foucault's “normal” biopolitics and Agamben's “exceptional” biopolitics, analyzing rice's role in modern contexts as a means of power consolidation, governance, and the production of sovereign legitimacy (Agamben, 2016).

2. Sacred Rice and Imperial Authority in Early Japanese Chronicles

Rice and its derivative, cooked rice, serve two primary roles: materially, rice's high productivity supports societal prosperity and stability as a staple food; symbolically, it legitimizes imperial rule and enforces the Emperor's lineage's authority. This elevates rice agriculture as the ideal lifestyle, casting non-rice-based ways of life as “unworthy of living”, underscoring its religious and ideological significance.

From the textual analysis of the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), the importance of rice as food is apparent. However, its portrayal as an everyday item, i.e., part of the common people's daily diet, is often subsumed under references to the “five grains” (*gokoku*) or “hundred grains” (*hyakukoku*), without emphasizing rice's unique status.

Outside the *Kamiyo* (Age of the Gods) section, there are ten instances throughout the *Nihon Shoki* where daily matters are described in terms of the “five grains” or “hundred grains,” yet only one instance where “rice” or “ear” is explicitly mentioned. This suggests that as a daily matter rice or rice ears were not considered to hold a status surpassing the five grains (or hundred grains) in the perspective of ancient sovereign authority.

In the *Kamiyo* chapters of the *Nihon Shoki*, rice, and ears (*ine* and *ho*) are used exclusively in religious and ideological contexts, highlighting their symbolic and ideological significance, unlike their mundane portrayal elsewhere in the text.

In the *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), compiled in the early 8th century, there are already examples of how ancient Japanese royal authority symbolized and utilized rice. In the myth of land creation, Izanagi and Izanami, under the command of the heavenly gods, are instructed: “There is a land of abundant reed plains and fertile rice ears spanning a thousand and five hundred autumns; it is fitting that you descend and govern it” (Horie, 1932, p. 9). Before the land's creation, the two deities are allocated this “land of fertile rice ears” (*mizuhonokuni*) by divine decree, which can be interpreted as the earliest definition of Yamato authority's identity—a society growing on the “land of fertile rice ears.”

Subsequently, metaphors defining world or territorial boundaries through rice (or rice ears) frequently appear. Notably, in areas not under the imperial lineage's control, the presence of rice (or rice ears) is often absent. In the conflict between Amaterasu Ōmikami and Susanoo, Amaterasu is depicted as a practitioner of wet-rice cultivation, managing sacred rice paddies, while Susanoo is portrayed as a destroyer of wet-rice agriculture. For instance, Susanoo's acts are described as highly disruptive (Horie, 1932, p. 50). In certain versions, Amaterasu is portrayed as a cultivator of wet fields, whereas Susanoo is described as the master of dry fields (Horie, 1932, p. 57). After Susanoo's destruction of the rice field landscape, Amaterasu retreats into the Heavenly Rock Cave, plunging the world into perpetual darkness, where “within the six directions of the cosmos, there was constant darkness, and the alternation of day and night was indistinguishable” (Horie, 1932, p. 50). Susanoo was exiled to the underworld by the myriad gods. His descendant, Ōkuninushi no Mikoto, later completed the land reconstruction.

This narrative establishes a dichotomy between the heavenly realm (*amatsu kuni*) and the earthly realm (*chi no kuni*), embodied by the celestial gods (*amatsukami*) and earthly deities (*kunitsukami*). The celestial gods are depicted as cultivators of rice paddies, ruling lands where rice is planted, while the earthly realm is governed by dry-field cultivators, destroyers of wet-rice agriculture, and the sinful Susanoo and his descendants.

In the *Kojiki*, the dichotomy is portrayed through the *kuniyuzuri* myth. After executing Ame-wakahiko, Amaterasu sent Takemikazuchi and Ame-no-Torifune to claim Ashihara no Nakatsukuni. Ōkuninushi and son Kotoshironushi surrendered peacefully, while Takeminakata resisted but submitted after defeat. Izumo Taisha was built to enshrine the terrestrial deities. The *Nihon Shoki* describes the event as a more violent confrontation, eradicating rebellious

gods and demons (Horie, 1932, p. 87).

This is followed by the most symbolically significant episode in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*: the descent of the heavenly grandchild (*tenson kōrin*). Upon learning of the successful subjugation of the Central Land of Reed Plains, Amaterasu Ōmikami commanded her son, Masakatsu Agatsu Kashihayahi Ninigi-no-Mikoto, to govern it. At that time, Ninigi-no-Mikoto had a son named Hikohohodemi no Mikoto, also known as Ninigi no Mikoto. Thus, it was Ninigi who descended, carrying the “sacred mirror” (*shinkyō*) and “the grain ears of the sacred rice from the Heavenly Fields” (*Takamagahara no Niwa no Ine*) to rule the “Land of Fertile Rice Ears of a Thousand Autumns” (*Ashihara no Mizuhonokuni*), a land deemed fit for kingship, with the divine decree of “eternal rule” (*tenjō mugen no shinchoku*).

This descent established the Three Divine Decrees: the “Divine Decree of Eternal Rule” (*tenjō mugen no shinchoku*), the “Divine Decree of the Sacred Mirror’s Worship” (*hōkyō hoshai no shinchoku*), and the “Divine Decree of the Sacred Rice Ears of the Heavenly Fields” (*saitei ine no shinchoku*). Ninigi no Mikoto, who became the great-grandfather of Emperor Jimmu, represents the link through which the transition from divine authority to imperial authority is constructed in the text. It is evident that the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* utilize the sacred mirror (or the Three Sacred Treasures) to construct imperial authority placing rice ears on equal footing with the sacred mirror, thereby attributing to rice ears an equivalent function in the construction of kingship (Li, 2023). From this analysis, it becomes apparent that the compilers of the chronicles intentionally or unintentionally downplayed rice’s role as a daily staple, creating a distinction in how rice appears in texts of varying nature. As Agamben notes: “‘Sacred’ refers to that which belongs to the gods. Such things are removed from human use and exchange... To make something sacred is to remove it from the human world and consign it to the divine... Religion can thus be defined as the act of separating objects, places, animals, or people from common use and transferring them to a distinct realm” (Agamben, 2016). Consequently, in the chronicles, rice (*ine*) or rice ears (*ho*) have been sacralized, becoming the quintessential “sacred plant” in the discourse of Yamato authority. The emperor derives his sacred right to rule through rice, the cultivation of rice is exalted, and the destruction or neglect of rice cultivation is imbued with a sense of original sin.

3. Rice, Sovereignty, and the Politics of Exclusion in Imperial Japan

In the rice-venerating discourse, a Schmittian political framework emerges: the Emperor's lineage, descended from the *amatsukami* (heavenly deities), receives rice as a divine gift and rules the "Land of Fertile Rice Ears" (*mizuhonokuni*). In contrast, groups like Susanoo's followers, who disrupt rice cultivation, bear the "original sin" and are exiled to the earthly realm (*chi no kuni*) as *kunitsukami* (earthly deities). The *amatsukami* defeat and subjugate them, seizing their lands and sanctifying them through shrines. This schema sanctifies imperial authority, legitimizes the conquest of non-rice-cultivating peoples, and justifies purges to maintain unity.

When Emperor Jimmu sought to construct his own legitimacy, he adhered to this paradigm. Before his eastward expedition, his oath proclaimed that “Ōhirume [Amaterasu Ōmikami] has granted me this Land of Fertile Reed Plains and Abundant Rice Ears” (Horie, 1932, p. 151). Subsequently, he eradicated the mountain-dwelling *tsuchigumo* (earth spiders), who neither practiced nor supported wet-rice agriculture and also eliminated Hayatama-no-Mikoto, another *amatsukami* who had allied with the *kunitsukami*.

This political schema is also reflected in the example of Yagokoro no Matachi recorded in the *Fudoki* of Hitachi Province. During the reign of Emperor Keitai, Yagokoro no Matachi, a devotee of the celestial gods (*amatsukami*), “reclaimed and cultivated new rice fields from the reed-covered plains of the western valley in the district.” The *kunitsukami*, represented by the deity Yato, “led a group and came in full force” to demand that Matachi “cease cultivating the fields.” Matachi donned armor, defeated the Yato deity, drove the remaining *kunitsukami* to the mountain pass, and marked the boundary with wooden stakes, commanding that the *kunitsukami* never transgress again. To appease the defeated *kunitsukami*, Matachi built a shrine in their honor, declaring, “I shall serve as a priest and offer perpetual worship” (Nakayama, 1899). Later, during the reign of Emperor Kōtoku, the lands cultivated by Matachi were inherited by Mibu no Ren Maro, who constructed irrigation ponds and embankments on the reclaimed rice fields. When the disobedient Yato deities once again invaded, Mibu no Ren Maro expelled them entirely, citing the protection of the people's livelihood as justification (Nakayama, 1899).

Emperor Jimmu’s eastern expedition and the legend of the Yato deity share a rice-centered, Emperor-centric narrative similar to Ōkuninushi’s story of relinquishing land. In this framework, the conquered are rendered the “ultimate exception,” incorporated into imperial discourse through “exclusive inclusion.” Militarily and politically, they are subjected to the Emperor’s “sacred violence” or eradicated, while religiously, they are integrated into the communal order. This approach of “exclusive inclusion” applied to various ancient Japanese groups, including the *tsuchigumo*, *emishi*, *hayato*, and *kunisu*. Some of these groups are seen as “fictitious ethnic collectives,” constructed by ancient

royal authority to depict lifestyles distinct from imperial subjects, aligning with the political objectives of the time (Haraguchi, 2011).

Under these differentiated narratives, the conquered were excluded from secular laws, allowing them to be killed without consequence. They were considered impure (*kegare*) due to their unsettled lifestyles, lack of rice cultivation, and disruptions to rice production, which were labeled as “heavenly crimes” (*amatsutsumi*) and “earthly crimes” (*kunitsutsumi*). This impurity required their exclusion through ritual purification (*harau*). Consequently, the lives of the conquered fell into a state akin to Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*—a liminal condition between polis and nature, human and animal, inclusion and exclusion. While their lives were nominally surrendered to the gods, their physical existence remained in the secular realm (Agamben, 2016).

For the *homo sacer*, the line between natural life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) disappears. The Emperor's prescribed *bios* becomes the standard for authentic life, rendering those who reject it as neither fully human nor purely animal. Instead, they are seen as monstrous hybrids or savages, like the *tsuchigumo* or Yato deity.

The Emperor embodies dual roles: a symbolic (political) body and a biological body. In 1928, Shigemitsu Nobuo explained that during the accession ritual, the Emperor reenacts the myth of Ninigi's descent (*tenson kōrin*), allowing Amaterasu Ōmikami to inhabit him as a “living god” (*arahitogami*), perpetuating unbroken rule over the “Land of Fertile Rice Ears.” (Orikuchi, 1995) In contrast to the Emperor's symbolic body, the biological body becomes akin to that of the *homo sacer*. First, the Emperor is not subject to secular laws, as such laws derive their authority from the Emperor's existence. While the Emperor may bestow surnames upon others, he possesses no surname himself (since no one can grant him one). This absence of a surname excludes the Emperor from being recognized as a citizen of the ancient state and thus denies him social rights. Second, texts such as the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* recount episodes where Emperors suffer divine retribution for disobeying the gods. For instance, Emperor Chūai is tortured to death after defying Amaterasu's commands, and in the “Ritual of Divination of the Imperial Body” (*gotai gokura*), it must be verified through divination whether the Emperor's body is being haunted by local deities. These narratives demonstrate that a living Emperor's biological body is excluded from divine law, as it cannot be ritually worshiped (Isozen, Zhang, & Ye, 2021).

In this manner, the Emperor, as the exception to human law, lays the foundation for human law itself by creating states of exception and producing bare life. Rice, as a tool for determining the legitimacy of political life (*bios*), occupies a central role. This is most prominently symbolized by the Daijōsai accession ceremony and its foundational component, the *Ninamesai* ritual, in which rice is consumed as a sacred offering and shared with the divine. The rice for the Daijōsai is sourced from specially designated sacred paddies (*saiden*) in the Yuki and Suki provinces, selected through divination. Historically, most of these provinces were located to the east and west of Yamashiro Province (present-day southern Kyoto). According to the *Fudoki* entry for Ibo District, consuming such offerings in ancient times symbolized the assertion of sovereignty over the land (Liu, 2020). The selection of rice over other grains is evident—Yamato's land, the fertile “Land of Rice Ears,” represents the expansion of Yamato authority and, by extension, the lifestyle centered on rice cultivation.

4. Rice and Imperial Power: Biopolitics in Practice

After the preceding analysis, viewing the emphasis on rice or the “love” for a rice-centered lifestyle merely as an inherent cultural trait of Japan would fall into the biopolitical discourse described by Foucault. From the perspective of *homo sacer*, biopolitics, and power expansion, the Meiji-era measures against non-rice-cultivating indigenous and colonial populations reveal deeper political motivations.

Take the Ainu people as an example. The 1899 Hokkaido Former Aborigines Protection Act forced them to abandon their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle for a sedentary, rice-based way of life. Those who maintained their original lifestyle were excluded from legal protections, clearly marking them as *homo sacer*. This transformation was starkly illustrated at the 1903 Osaka Exposition, where Ainu individuals were exhibited, reducing them to a bare, animal-like existence within the sovereign order. This exhibition created a paradoxical condition: every viewer acted as a sovereign, with the contrast between attendees and the Ainu affirming the latter's dehumanized status as mere animals on display.

A similar scenario unfolded in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period. The Truku people, residing in forests and mountains, were compelled by the colonial government to relocate to plains for rice cultivation due to their incompatible hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Notably, after displacing the Truku from their mountain villages, the colonial administration did not destroy the settlements but instead built shrines on the sites, mirroring the narrative of Yagokoro no Matachi in the *Hitachi no Kuni Fudoki* (Simon, 2006). Here, the original structural framework of imperial

power production, rooted in the ancient Emperor system, re-emerges, underscored by the distinction created through rice cultivation. This modern application of the ancient schema highlights how the expansion and legitimization of power in colonial and modernizing contexts were deeply intertwined with the politics of rice.

In colonial Korea, resistance to imperial authority manifested through conflicts between dry-field and wet-field farming. In 1928, over 5,000 individuals displaced by flooding along the North Han River sought to relocate and practice slash-and-burn farming, but the Governor-General's Office denied their request. The following year, police forcibly evicted the refugees and destroyed their homes. While analyses of dry-field farming issues often adopt sociological or economic perspectives, they frequently overlook the semiotic principles involved. The suppression of non-sedentary, non-rice-growing populations reflects a defense of the emperor's symbolic authority, highlighting that imperial exploitation was both economic and deeply symbolic. This dimension is crucial to understanding the events.

5. Conclusion

Rice cultivation serves a dual purpose in the imperial Japanese state: as a staple food, it underpins social stability and governance; as a symbolic marker, it legitimizes imperial authority through myth, ritual, and power discourse. This discourse reflects micro-level biopolitical operations, reinforcing internal unity and justifying external expansion by categorizing non-rice-cultivating groups as being in a "state of exception." In modern colonial practices, this led to the forced transformation and oppression of non-sedentary populations, revealing the rationale behind imperial expansion. Rice transcends mere agriculture, becoming a symbolic system integral to the political logic of the emperor system, normalizing lifestyles while dispossessing marginalized groups. Understanding this dynamic offers insight into the mechanisms of imperial power and the biopolitical logic shaping rice culture.

References

- Agamben, G. (2016). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Wu Guanjun, Trans.). Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press. pp. 23, 25, 27.
- Haraguchi, K. (2008). Re-examining the Hayato articles in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki (1). *Journal of Human Culture Studies, Nagoya City University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences*, (9), 188-204.
- Haraguchi, K. (2011). Re-examining the Hayato articles in the Kojiki and Nihon Shoki (2). *Journal of Human Culture Studies, Nagoya City University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences*, (15), 204-232.
- Horie, H. (1932). *Nihon Shoki: Annotated Edition* (Vol. 1). Tokyo: Meiji Shoin. pp. 9, 50, 57, 87, 151.
- Huang, M., & Huang, P. (2020). An analysis of the influence of Japanese rice cultivation culture on interpersonal relationships. *People's Forum*, (5), 130-131.
- Isozen, J., Zhang, H., & Ye, J. (2021). The fate of unvenerated deities: The mythologization of modern Japan. *Japanese Studies*, (01), 131-180.
- Li, G. (2021). Research on the origins of rice culture from the perspectives of Chinese and Japanese scholars. *Journal of Ecological Ethnic Culture Studies*, 13(05), 38-49+153-154.
- Li, L. (2023). From "King of Wa" to "Grand King Governing All under Heaven"—Political titles and state-building in ancient Japan. *Japanese Learning and Research*, (05), 58-66.
- Liu, X. (2020). The ritual structure and cultural interpretation of the emperor's accession Daijōsai ceremony. *Japanese Studies*, (S1), 154-155.
- Nakayama, N. (1899). *New Edition of the Hitachi Province Gazetteer* (Vol. 1). Tokyo: Sekizenkan. pp. 257.
- Orikuchi, S. (1995). The True Meaning of the Daijōsai. In *Collected Works of Orikuchi Shinobu* (Vol. 3). Tokyo: Chūōkōronsha.
- Qian, L., & Ye, L. (2022). Discussion on rice farming in ancient Japan from the perspective of agricultural technology exchange. *Agricultural Archaeology*, 3, 200-209.
- Simon, S. (2006). Formosa's First Nations and the Japanese: From Colonial Rule to Post-Colonial Resistance. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 4(1).