

## Preface: “Rice and Language Across Asia”

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This special issue of *Rice* presents a selection of papers from the international symposium “Rice and Language Across Asia: Crops, Movement, and Social Change,” held at Cornell University, Ithaca, USA, on September 22–25, 2011.

The goal of this meeting was to reexamine the relationship between the beginnings and spread of rice agriculture and cultural, social, and linguistic developments of early Asian societies. Rice farming is but one aspect of the development of early agriculture in Asia, which of course also involved animal domestication and the adoption of other crops such as millets, tubers, and other vegetables, but the special focus on rice is justified because of the highly significant role of rice in the agricultural transformations and expansions across Asia over the last ten millennia. This included the growth and dispersal of early human populations, as well as the dramatic influences on social organization that accompanied the introduction, development, and increased reliance on rice farming.

Recent years have seen rapid advances in the multiple related fields of research that bear on these questions: in linguistics and historical linguistics, in particular in the fields of language reconstruction and subgrouping; in both

human genetics and plant genetics; in archaeology, including especially in the burgeoning subfield of archaeobotany; in anthropology (see O’Connor this volume and O’Connor 1995), deploying a deep historical and regional approach of a certain kind that had become uncommon in anthropology), as well as in other related fields, such as economic history, climate research, and others.

For some time now, scholars in these disparate yet related disciplines have grappled with the pursuit of data and the comparison with results from other disciplines: see for example the collected essays volumes by Sagart et al. (2005), Sanchez-Mazas et al. (2008), Petraglia and Allchin (2007), Peregrine et al. (2009), Enfield and White (2011) and others. All face the problems of how to compare research results and how to achieve interdisciplinary communication and mutual reinforcement between scholars addressing the problems of shared concern, across different disciplines.

All of the contributions to our September 2011 symposium, including those presented here, were contributed in the spirit of extending these discussions and exchanging views between disciplines on the complex relationship between crops, language, and sociocultural developments in early Asia. Because of the interrelated lines of evidence emerging from linguistics, genetics, biology and environmental studies, archaeology, anthropology, and history, the complexity of the issues cannot be avoided, and further interdisciplinary engagement will continue to be necessary. This includes a need for further effort to facilitate the communication between disciplines, and a need for reflection on the adequacy of indisciplined terminology and ways of thinking that may be taken for granted within disciplines, but the limits of which become even more apparent in interdisciplinary encounters than

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in theoretical debates unfolding inside each discipline (as is apparent with terms like “populations,” “cultures,” “languages,” and the like).

The pan-Asian perspective adopted in our symposium, though demanding and difficult, will also clearly continue to be necessary to explore the numerous large and as yet unresolved issues of just how early people transmitted varieties of plants to new regions, how and by which routes they disseminated the use of plants such as rice between the east, south, and southeast parts of the continent; how this drove human migrations and expansions across Asia; and what the social consequences were. The need for a pan-Asian perspective (coupled, of course, with an awareness of Middle Eastern and western Eurasian and other regions, as well as comparatively with other parts of the world where agriculture has been initiated, whether independently or secondarily) remains valid even though we are already able to agree with some degree of certainty on the original regions of crop domestication, and even if we do now have a partial understanding within each of the many concerned disciplines of certain specific problem areas. This includes our developing understanding of the map of language families and their changing geographical spread in the past; the fragmented and highly complex but partially observable record of past human migrations and expansions that remain within the genetic codes both of living people, and as found in the recoverable remains of ancient people; the intriguing but as yet unexplained map of genetic family trees of known varieties of rice, and other relevant food plants, weeds, and so on; the partially recoverable record of climate change (as discussed at the symposium by Brendan Buckley making use of dendrochronology and other possible tools for tracing environmental and cyclical climate changes in deep history); in the partially recovered archaeological record of past farming history and agricultural economy; and other aspects.

As one example of the many unknowns that still remain, we may note the issue of the as yet unknown ethnolinguistic identity of the peoples who many millennia ago first cultivated rice in the Yangtze river valley, in what today is China. This exemplifies the limits of what we know about the relationship between language, culture, food production technologies as ways of life, and how these are borrowed or transmitted across cultural boundaries which are themselves at the same time social constructions. As Richard O'Connor suggests, we may gain comparative insight from history and anthropology on how to frame and interpret data produced with methodologies from the disciplines that allow us to reach farther into the human past. But even as we learn to trace some ethnolinguistic continuities into the past, we will still need to refrain from projecting modern-day ethno-

national identities (“Chinese,” “Indian,” “Japanese,” etc.) into discussions of a distant past for which these current labels may not have much relevance.

Apart from the papers included in this special issue, the symposium also included riveting presentations by Susan McCouch, Patricia Donegan, David Stampe, Osada Toshiki, Tao Sang, Brendan Buckley, and Pan Wuyun, none of which regrettably could not be included here; in addition, there was a formidable set of poster presentations with contributions from Christina Warinner, Da Di, Erik Gilbert, Manjil Hazarika, Gwendolyn Hyslop, Eleanor Kingwell-Banham, Emma Harvey, Chen Xingcan, Li Liu, Pittayawat Pittayaporn, Paul Sidwell, Alison Weisskopf, Ling Qin, Yuan-ching Tsai, Yi-fang Chen, Ming-hsing Lai, Ai-ling Hour, Yu-chi Chen, Yu-chien Tseng, and others (including also from several of the scholars whose paper contributions are published here); plus the commentary of several more discussants (more complete information can be found at <http://conf.ling.cornell.edu/riceandlanguage/>). We hope all this scholarship can continue to grow and find further venues for collaboration and for publication as we go into the future.

In this issue, 12 articles and 1 of the symposium discussants' commentaries have been included. The first four (by Fuller, Bellwood, d'Alpoim-Guèdes, and Castillo) review and expand the archaeological knowledge about early agriculture in Asia and its wider region. Fuller, who served as a keynote speaker at the symposium, pays special attention to the pan-Asian context, as well as to South Asian developments. The next four articles (by Sagart, Bradley, Southworth, and Whitman) treat the same scope of issues from the perspective mainly of historical linguistics. The contribution by Sanchez-Mazas and her colleagues offers an updated perspective from human genetics, and the two following papers (the first by Takashige and his colleagues and the second by Hsieh, Hsing, and their colleagues), from plant genetics, also reconnecting to the multidisciplinary aspirations of the symposium. In addition, we publish a paper on inter-Asian rice exchanges in later historical periods by veteran agricultural economist Randolph Barker, as well as the revised remarks by Richard O'Connor, one of several symposium discussants.

As co-editors, we are very grateful towards the journal for giving us this opportunity to publish this rich selection of papers so soon after the symposium. We are also thankful for the generous support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and from Cornell University's College of Arts and Science, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, East Asia Program, Institute for the Social Sciences, Department of Linguistics, and Southeast Asia Program; as well as from the Lehman Fund for Scholarly Exchange with China and the Departments of Anthropology,

Asian Studies, and Classics at Cornell, and from its South Asia Program. This support helped us bring together an exceptional gathering of scholars from Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America for a highly productive few days of discussion. Once again, we express the gratitude of participants to all these supporters and funding agencies, as well as also to all the many attendees and the participants, for their dedicated contributions; and also, once again, we thank the symposium organizers who included Professors Abigail Cohn and John Whitman, both of the Dept. of Linguistics; John Phan of the Dept. of Asian Studies; Susan McCouch, Dept. of Plant Breeding and Genetics, Cornell University; and Laurent Sagart, of the Centre de Recherches Linguistiques sur l'Asie Orientale, in Paris, France.

We hope that this special issue will provoke further research and debate on the exciting and deeply interrelated questions regarding early people and their rice, so many of which remain unanswered!

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