

Perspective



Geography, Food, and Politics

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IN THE UNITED STATES, Canada, the Argentine, Australia, and New Zealand food has generally been abundantly available and often in such surplus supply as not to make those who live there cognizant of the importance of food to the existence and well-being of men and nations elsewhere in the world. In these favored areas food tends to be taken for granted because it is so abundantly available in almost unlimited quantities. It is not generally so elsewhere in the world and particularly not so in the Far East, except in the rice bowl—Burma, Indo-China, and Thailand. Because it is so here, the rice bowl is of political significance.

In the deficit food grain areas of the Far East the major portion of each man's labor goes to produce or procure food for himself and family, and most of the remainder to produce or procure clothing and shelter, with little, if any, left for the amenities of life. Existence here is hard and unremitting. It is one with which Americans generally have little familiarity. The constant and primary concern of men in the deficit countries of the Far East is food and how to obtain it in sufficient quantity to maintain themselves. The constant and primary concern also of their governments is how to obtain and pay for sufficient food grain to maintain their people.

Without adding any new land to existing croplands in the rice bowl, experience in Japan and elsewhere indicate that total food grain production could be doubled in the course of two decades by improvements in and extension of controlled irrigation systems, by

the judicious use of commercial fertilizer, and by improvements in seed stocks and cultural practices generally.

If account is also taken of opportunities to expand the cropland base, another 12 million to 22 million acres might perhaps be brought under cultivation in the three countries, making a total cropland base for the rice bowl of from 65 million to 75 million acres. The potential there is very considerable, perhaps sufficient to feed 60 million to 80 million additional people, such as will probably be added to the population of India, Ceylon, Malaysia, and Japan during the next 15 years.

With improved cultural practices, then, and increased use of commercial fertilizer, improved and extended irrigation and with additional cropland brought into cultivation, it would seem that the food grain needs of the free countries of Asia could be met by the overflow from the rice bowl.

Free political institutions and free governments are not indigenous to the Far East. How well such institutions may be made to flourish in a strange environment, after recent transplanting, only time will tell.

To survive, the free governments of the Far East must devise means of feeding their people without dependence on the Communist bloc. If this dependence is once firmly established, free political institutions are likely to wither and die quickly from total want of nourishment.

(Excerpts from an article by Mr. Anderson in Foreign Agriculture, July-August 1953)