



## Have You Eaten (Rice)?

### Description

In the living memory of the older generations of Singaporeans, “Have you eaten (rice)?” (?????), in various dialects, was a standard greeting, very much like “Hello” or “How are you?”. Nowadays, you hardly hear people greet each other in this way. Perhaps, living from hand to mouth was common in the past, and having eaten took on a very different meaning. That is why a variation of “Have you eaten (rice)” was “Have you had a filling meal?” (???????)



Early spring rice planting, just south of the Vietnamese-Chinese border

The [origin of Asian rice \(\*Oryza sativa\*\)](#) can be traced back to 12,000-11,000 BCE in the Yangtze Valley. Today, 90% of rice is produced and consumed in Asia. But anecdotally, the amount of rice consumed by an individual has changed. In my younger days, we ate a lot more rice. Today, most people hardly eat more than a few spoonful (and sometimes not at all) for fear of what rice does to their waistline. Refined carbohydrates have now been deemed an enemy – just like eggs in the past. (Egg yolk contains high cholesterol levels, so experts told us to limit our intake to protect ourselves from cardiovascular diseases). The Japanese continued to consume rice as before – and they appear just as slim (and healthy).



Lunch (???in northeastern China. Note the dumplings on the right of the picture – and no rice. Lady on the right, my postgraduate student guide and left, a representative of my sponsor

In my travels in Northern China, I noticed an interesting phenomenon in the usage of the words *fan* ? and *mi* ?. In southern China, *Nanyang* (Southeast Asia) or locally, *fan* ? is used to mean both rice and a meal but not so in northern China. In the north where the people do not eat rice regularly, cooked rice is referred to as ?? while ? itself takes on the meaning of a meal such as ?? (breakfast), ?? (lunch), and dinner (??). Another observation is in a northern restaurant, a waiter/waitress will ask you to choose the ??or principal food – whether it is rice, noodles, or dumpling. Initially, I found it very strange as I have always eaten rice and nothing else to go with the other dishes!

In ancient times, [“?” refers to things we eat](#). In simplified Chinese, [“?” replaces “?”](#). Chinese characters with “?” located on the left of a character indicate food, eating or meals. Things we eat regular (???) become ? – it relates to food or a meal and not cooked rice. Because southern Chinese are rice eaters, rice (?) and a meal (?) became interchangeable in common usage.

Travelling has shown me other norms and new ways of seeing this wonderful world. And travelling back through time has also shown me the tremendous improvements in our living standards. The common greetings in the past, “Have you eaten?” or “Have you had a filling meal?”, are now irrelevant.