

【Terasaka Rice Terraces】

The Terasaka rice terraces embody the age-old agricultural tradition of terrace farming. In mountainous countries like Japan, terraced fields are used to maximize the arable land area by converting sloped terrain into a series of level, step-like plots. Having level ground is particularly necessary for wet rice cultivation, since the rice fields are flooded for part of the year. If the fields are not level, the water will simply run down the hillside.

Located between the city of Chichibu and the town of Yokoze, the Terasaka rice terraces are the largest terraced fields in Saitama Prefecture. Approximately 250 plots occupy 5.5 hectares of hillside that rise 40 meters in elevation from the base to the top. The terraces are framed by the Yokoze River and one of its tributaries, the Sozawa River, which joins the Yokoze to the southwest. The hillside is believed to have formed during the last glacial age, between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago, when sediment carried by the Sozawa River was deposited in natural alluvial terraces.

Humans settled in the area during the Jōmon period (c. 14,000–c. 350 BCE), and pit dwellings and a stone-axe workshop dating to around 2500 BCE have been discovered at the southern end of the terraces. Many centuries later, minor lords of the Yokoze family ruled the area. The town still bears their name, which is recorded on graves and a stone monument dated to 1445. The name “Terasaka,” which means “temple hill,” most likely comes from one of two temples whose ruins have been found near the northern end of the fields.

By the late twentieth century, the fields had fallen out of use as local farmers grew older—a common problem in many parts of Japan. In 2001, local groups mobilized to revitalize the fields. They established a new part-private, part-municipal system of ownership to educate the community in traditional rice-growing methods.

The Terasaka rice terraces are a constantly changing landscape. Their appearance shifts with the seasons, as does the ecosystem they provide for local wildlife. In late spring, the borders between fields are shored up and the earth is tilled. By early summer, the fields are flooded and planted with rice seedlings. Frogs, dragonflies, and waterfowl thrive in this artificial wetland, and the clear sky is reflected in the surfaces of the flooded fields. By late summer, green pheasants hide among the tall rice leaves. In autumn, this verdant landscape gives way to fields of swaying golden stalks capped with ripening grain. Around the first of October, bright red spider lilies break out along the fields, and the rice is ready for harvest. Working with hand sickles, the farmers cut the plants and tie them into bundles with rice straw. These bundles, called *futataba*, are

draped over wooden racks to dry in the sun for about two weeks.

Today, preschools, elementary schools, businesses, and educational organizations cultivate their own plots, maintaining the scenic beauty of the terraced hillside. Both white and black rice are grown, and the field owners eat the rice themselves or sell it to local retailers.