



CULTURE OF THE WORLD: FOOD AND MYTHOLOGY

Seminar Leader: **Tessa Myren**

House Leader: **Menghe “Yume” Xu**

Course Description

Food is a critical part of everyday life around the world. Because of the importance of food in human life, societies and cultures are built around the food they can grow. Every culture has mythology or stories related to food, whether it is a story behind why a food is a certain way or a myth explaining why a certain food is abundant. In this seminar we will focus on the connections between food, culture, geography, and history. As the topics progress, we will discuss how food traditions connect different areas of the world, and what can be learned from looking at the food of an entirely different culture.

Schedule

Day 1: *Introduction to Culture through Food: Starting at Home*

Since food is something everyone has experience with, we will start with a brainstorming discussion on what foods we enjoy and what myths, stories (including pop culture), or culture are behind them. To help guide our discussion, we will examine some stories from Japanese culture, such as Momotarō(桃太郎), the Goddess of Food (Ōgetsu-hime おおげつひめのかみ), and the Story of a Riceball. Through the discussions and stories, we will identify the basic themes the we will look for in stories and culture as the course goes forward.

Day 2: *Asian and Middle-Eastern Food, Mythology, and Culture*

On the second day, we will turn to a discussion of the food, customs, and agriculture of cultures near Japan, including those in China, Korea, India, and others. We will look at foods and traditions that have been exchanged between these cultures, and how changes in climate and geography contribute to the food and culture.

Day 3: *Europe: North and South*

Moving further away from the familiar, the third day will focus on European traditions and food, especially comparing southern areas such as the Mediterranean, England, and Spain to Russia, Germany, and Norway. How are location, geography, weather, and history reflected in their foods and traditions? What is similar and familiar even from across the world? We will find that all the cultures we have studied are interconnected, having influenced each other over time. This will lead us to discuss how trade around the world, especially with food, has connected very different areas and cultures.

Day 4: *North and South America: Blending of Cultures*

Using the skills and foundation that the students have acquired during the seminar, we will look at foods, mythology, and culture in North America. Because of North



America's history, there is a unique blend of cultures from Europe, Asia, and other areas of the world, combined with the native culture. This is true of other parts of the world as well, each place having its own blend. Based on our knowledge of the rest of the world, what can we determine about the America's history and its people by looking at the country's food and agriculture?

Final Exercise

The students will use information from the class to pick an area of the world and a particular culture and make up their own myth about a food, agricultural technique, animal, etc. and discuss how they used what they learned and the checklist (supplied in class) to make the myth.

Pre Assignments and Reading List

- Brainstorming questions about food, mythology, and culture
- Review checklist handout (Day 1)
- Read Momotarō, the Story of a Riceball, and Ōgetsu-hime handout (Day 1)
- Read Korean, Indian, and Chinese Myth handout (Day 2)
- Read Europe handout (Day 3)
- Read America handout (Day 4)

Message from the House Leader

Hi! My name is Menghe Xu and am usually called 昞 as my name is too hard to pronounce. I'm currently a Masters' student in University of Tokyo majoring in Chemical System Engineering. I'm from China and has been in Japan for 5 years so far. I love eating and love all kinds of food around the world (especially Japanese ramen!!!), and I'm really excited discussing with you about food and the culture behind it. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me! Can't wait to see you all!!

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hello! My name is Tessa Myren and I'm a junior at Princeton University. This semester I declared as a chemistry major, which I am excited to begin studying! Even though I am a very scientific person, I love looking at how cultures overlap in interesting ways, especially in terms of food and mythology. Ever since I was little I have been obsessed with mythology and food and cultures around the world, though when I was younger I didn't realize exactly how interconnected these three topics can be and how much someone can learn about the world by looking at something as simple as food. I look forward to meeting all of you and having some great discussions! If you have any questions or just want to chat, send me an email.