China on the Palouse

The Rice Theory of Culture
Evidence that Wheat Farming Made the West and Northern China More Individualistic Than the East

Thursday, April 4 • 3:30 p.m.
Teaching & Learning Center – Room 047

Culture influences how people behave, but what causes cultures to differ? This talk explains how rice farming and wheat farming created very different cultures in the East and West—and northern and southern China.

Why is rice important? Rice farming’s irrigation and high labor requirements gave southern China a tight, interdependent culture. In contrast, traditional wheat farming required less labor and less coordination, giving northern China a more free-wheeling independent culture. Tests of young people across China suggest these differences are persisting in the modern world.

Featuring Thomas Talhelm
Dr. Talhelm is an assistant professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business. He studies how culture affects the way we behave and how rice and wheat agriculture have given northern and southern China two very different cultures.

His research also finds that liberal culture in the US is more individualistic and that getting people to think more analytically increases support for liberal social policies, whereas thinking holistically increases support for conservative policies.

Dr. Talhelm lived in China for five years teaching high school in Guangzhou as a Princeton in Asia fellow, a freelance journalist in Beijing, and a Fulbright scholar and a NSF Graduate Research Fellow. He earned his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Virginia and a B.A. with Highest Honors in psychology and Spanish from the University of Michigan.

Co-Presented by:

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