

Behavioral differences between Northern v. Southern Chinese linked to wheat v. rice farming, study shows

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Credit: University of Chicago

A new study from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business analyzing behavior patterns of people across China shows that the traditional interdependent rice-farming culture of southern China has resulted in today's residents—even city dwellers far removed from farming—being more interdependent and less controlling over their environment compared to their countrymen who hail from the more independent wheat-farming culture of northern China.


In the study, titled "Moving chairs in Starbucks: Observational studies find rice-wheat [cultural differences](#) in daily life in China," by Chicago Booth Behavioral Scientist Thomas Talhelm (to be published in the 4th volume of *Science Advances*), Talhelm observed 8,964 [people](#) sitting in Starbucks cafes in six cities all across China and found that people in cities in southern China were less likely to be sitting alone.


In a second study, researchers moved chairs together in cafes, so that they were partially blocking the aisles. The study found that people in northern China were more likely to move the chairs out of the way, which is consistent with the findings that people in these individualistic cultures are more likely to try to exert control over the environment. This fits with the everyday reality of wheat farming, in which farmers were more independent from their neighbors than in rice villages.

On the other hand, people in southern China were more likely to adjust themselves to the environment by squeezing through the chairs in these cafes.

DO DIFFERENCES ROOTED IN HISTORICAL RICE- VERSUS WHEAT-GROWING CULTURES INFLUENCE PEOPLE IN CHINA TODAY?


- For thousands of years, people in northern China grew **wheat**, while people in southern China farmed **paddy rice**.
- Rice farmers often shared labor efforts and irrigation networks, which fostered an interdependent culture unlike wheat-growing regions' more individualistic culture.
- To explore whether farming legacies leave traces even in modern culture among people far removed from farming, Thomas Talhelm *et al.* observed customers in **Starbucks** in six Chinese cities.






- People in rice-growing regions were **less likely** to sit alone and less likely to move chairs that experimenters positioned to partially block people's path.
- People in wheat-growing regions, by contrast, were **more likely** to sit alone and move the chair that blocked their path.
- Humans' farming legacies still inform people's behaviors in everyday life, even today, the results suggest.



 = City in Wheat Region

 = City in Rice Region

Talhelm et al., *Science Advances* (2018)

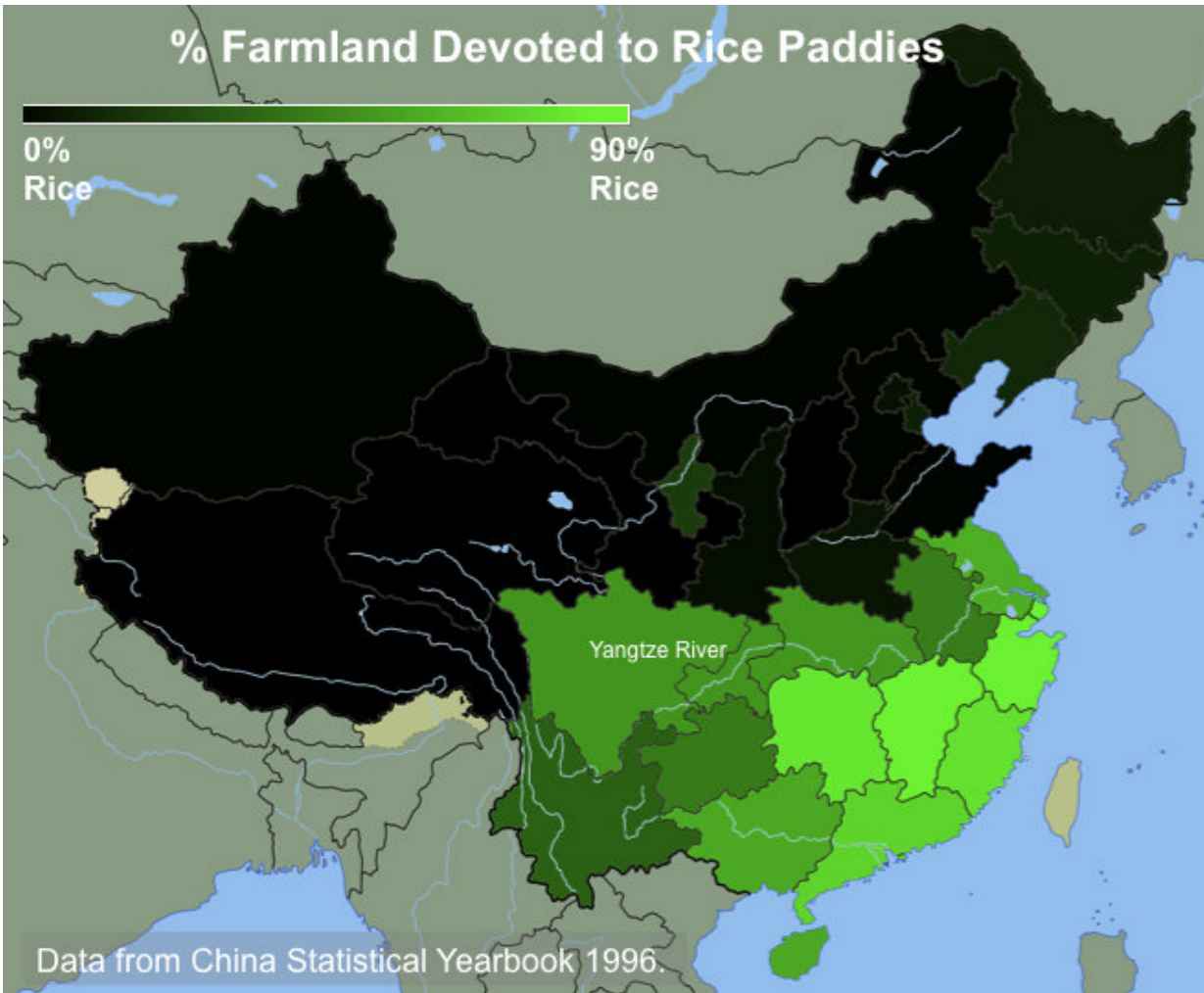
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After observing the behaviors of customers in cafes in several modern Chinese cities, researchers report that people from rice-growing regions showed interdependent behaviors, like sitting in groups or squeezing themselves through narrowly placed chairs, whereas people from wheat-growing regions more often displayed individualistic behaviors, sitting alone or actively moving chairs that blocked their way. Credit: Carla Schaffer / AAAS

The reason: traditional rice farmers from southern China had to share labor and coordinate irrigation in a way that most northern China wheat farmers did not, thus making them more interdependent and more enmeshed in navigating social relationships, rather than free to act independently.

"I think people in China have long had a sense that northerners behave differently from southerners," Talhelm said. "This study suggests a reason why—rice farming—and that those differences are surviving into the modern age."

Talhelm became interested in studying the cultural differences between southern and northern China when he was living in Guangzhou, which is in the south.



The percentage of cultivated land devoted to rice paddies in provinces across China. Southern China has traditionally farmed rice, while northern China has farmed wheat and other dryland crops like millet. Credit: Thomas Talhelm

"I noticed little things in people's behavior there (in the south), like people seemed nervous if they accidentally bumped into me in the grocery store. It seemed like people were reserved, focused on avoiding conflict," he said. "Then I moved up to Beijing and the north, and I quickly saw that being reserved was certainly not part of the Beijing way of conducting oneself."

Even in China's most modern cities like Beijing and Shanghai, rice-wheat differences in farming patterns live on today in everyday life in terms of different behavior of southern and northern residents, Talhelm concluded. Although many people talk about the urban-rural divide in China, the differences in this study were between China's largest cities, suggesting that there are important cultural differences in China beyond urban-rural differences.

More information: Thomas Talhelm et al. Moving chairs in Starbucks: Observational studies find rice-wheat cultural differences in daily life in China, *Science Advances* (2018). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aap8469](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aap8469)

Provided by University of Chicago

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