

Title: People from Historically Rice-Farming Cultures Perform Better on Exams

Speaker: Prof. Sudipta Sarangi, Virginia Tech University

Area: Economics

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Abstract:

Why do some countries do so much better than other countries in education? Resources are an obvious explanation. Genes for IQ are a controversial explanation. We argue that cultural differences in valuing hard work are an important factor. To test this idea, we studied paddy rice farming because it required about twice the labor of other common crops like wheat and corn. Historians have documented traditions in rice-farming cultures that celebrate hard work, such as festivals to get energized for periods of hard work. We found that cultures with a history of rice farming scored higher on standardized tests across countries. Differences remained even when we compared students in the same countries but with parents born in other cultures. One limitation is that much rice farming is in East Asia, which raises the question of whether the differences are due to some other aspect of East Asian culture. We took advantage of the fact that China has both rice-farming and wheat-farming regions. Students who were born in rice-farming counties outperformed students from wheat counties in a large, nationally representative Chinese sample. Rice areas also outperformed wheat areas in the imperial exam during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Finally, we tested differences in attitudes toward hard work. People in rice-farming cultures or who have parents from rice-farming cultures endorsed hard work more. Together, these results highlight culture as an enduring influence on educational performance.

Speaker Profile:



Sudipta Sarangi is Professor and Department Head at the Department of Economics, Virginia Tech. Prior to joining Virginia Tech, he was a Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at Louisiana State University and a Program Director at the National Science Foundation. His research spans applied game theory, network economics, experiments, and development economics, with publications in the leading journals such as Review of Economics and Statistics, Journal of Economic Theory, Games and Economic Behavior and Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization. He has held prominent academic and policy roles, including Program Director at the U.S. National Science Foundation and Research Professor at DIW Berlin. Prof. Sarangi is also a Co-Editor of the Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization. His scholarly contributions have been recognized with multiple awards, including the Kuznets Prize. He is also one of the jury members for the Infosys Prize in Economics 2025.

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