Throughout China’s modernization process, people’s relationships with the foods they consume have changed. The Chinese state has accomplished national food security with its intensive grain policies over the past thirty years. As China surges into the twenty-first century, however, the ability to feed its people no longer sits at the forefront of the state’s primary grain challenges. Instead, the state is faced with providing grain to China’s increasingly demanding urban consumer society. Indeed, consuming grain is an everyday practice many Chinese participate in. The introduction of a neoliberal logic of governance in urban areas allows the state to govern through market desires. As more members of China’s urban consumer society seek to achieve and maintain a distinction of being a ‘quality’ (suzhi) person, they purchase and consume products in the market that represent their ability to be a high quality person.

This talk looks at how the market for high ‘quality’ rice from the northeast of China has grown and thrived over the past decade. Complicating and enabling this market has been the globalization of China’s consumer society. Today, urban consumers want high quality products, but they also flaunt their global citizenship in ways that seek to break away from Chinese traditions, such as eating rice as the main staple food in their diet. These two goals come together—and are highlighted in unique ways—through the market for high quality northeast rice.