



Understanding forms of contention in the post-Soviet setting

Rural responses to Chinese land investments in Tajikistan

Irna Hofman

LDPI
Working
Paper 35

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Published by:

The Land Deal Politics Initiative

www.iss.nl/ldpi

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in collaboration with:

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Published with support from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Atlantic Philanthropies, Inter-Church Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), Ford Foundation and Miserior.

Abstract

The overwhelming attention to global ‘land grabbing’ has paid no heed to recent agricultural land investments in post-Soviet Central Asia. This paper contributes to fill the void and focuses on the rural politics in the context of China’s rising presence in Tajikistan’s agriculture. I take an actor-oriented inductive perspective to understand the politics of encounter in the context of Chinese agricultural land investments in rural Tajikistan. Global land investments take on different forms in different places, resulting from different investment motivations, local ecological conditions, but moreover from particular encounters on the ground. In this paper, I highlight the frictions that resulted from the dialogue and interaction between Tajik villagers and Chinese investors, which interestingly reveal first of all the relation of rural dwellers to the state. The struggle over land control in Tajikistan hitherto took place in an arena of domestic actors, but in the last years Chinese and Iranian land investors have entered the rural area. However, while grievances over the Chinese presence are observed, they are part of a broader struggle of current land reforms, and there is more fundamental discontent with the current socio-economic environment and land accumulation at large.

About the Author

Irna Hofman is a Ph.D. researcher and research assistant at the Modern East Asia Research Centre (MEARC) at Leiden University Institute for Area Studies. She holds a Master of Science degree in Environmental Sciences from Wageningen University and is rural sociologist by training. Her work and interests are focused on agrarian and social change, rural sociology and transition economies, and her past research activities focused on agrarian reform in Uzbekistan. Her research in Tajikistan focuses on the politics of China’s agricultural land investments with particular regard to the dynamics at the local level.

Acknowledgement

The author is grateful for the financial support of the Catharine van Tussenbroekfonds and the Land Deal Politics Initiative that enabled the fieldwork in Tajikistan. I am moreover grateful for the logistical support provided by organisations based in Tajikistan, which names I decidedly would not like to disclose. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Oane Visser for his valuable inputs for this paper. I would also like to thank all other colleagues who have provided comments and feedback on earlier versions.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	1
2 The Tajik background	3
2.1 Soviet state of agriculture: nearly 70 years of collective agriculture	4
2.2 The early 1990s: first initiatives towards farm restructuring	5
2.3 Late 1990s and early 2000s: economic recovery and further steps towards individual farming	5
2.4 The present: domestic competition over land	7
2.5 Key features in regulation that influence patterns of farm ownership and production at present	8
3 Understanding responses from below: the politics of encounter	9
4 Everyday encounters in the realm of Chinese agricultural land investments	11
4.1 Characteristics of the research sites	11
4.2 The Chinese arrival	13
4.3 Conflicting land demands	14
4.4 Socio-economic inequalities and capital constraints to farm.....	15
4.5 Ecological problems and locals' ideas about the Chinese 'projects'.....	16
4.6 Land as a liability and rural inhabitants' relation to the state	17
4.7 Direct local interactions between the Chinese people and Tajik villagers	18
5 Conclusion: global interactions and rural-state relations.....	19
References	20

1 Introduction

The ‘global land grab’ that attracted worldwide media and academic attention has resulted in numerous research initiatives and publications (see for instance Cotula *et al.* 2009, Borras *et al.* 2011, White *et al.* 2012, Wolford *et al.* 2013, Borras and Franco 2012). In the early publications following the widely quoted *Seized* by the NGO, Grain (2008), China was assumed to be among the most prominent ‘grabbers’, with increasing land investments all over the globe (Hofman and Ho 2012). The phrase ‘the Chinese are coming’ espoused fear in different contexts at different times.

In the last three years however, the role of nation states in ‘global land grabbing’, such as China and the states of the Persian Gulf, are thought to have been overstated; the major drivers behind land deals now seem to be corporate players, whilst also domestic and interregional actors are investing in land (Wolford *et al.* 2013, Borras *et al.* 2012, Cotula 2012).

Nonetheless, Chinese land investments do take place all over the globe, driven by various motivations and pursued by different actors; Chinese state organs, as well as Chinese companies pursue agricultural activities abroad (Hofman and Ho 2012). Some are purely profit-oriented, others are driven by domestic food insecurity, and a third is driven by geopolitical imperatives (*ibid.*).

The unfolding of land investments – not only those land deals pursued by Chinese investors – differs worldwide, shaped by and leading to particular encounters on the ground. Whereas large-scale investments regularly result in significant land use changes, other smaller scale projects have less physical impact, yet might impact labour relations in not less radical ways. The subsequent responses from below might be ambiguous, multi-layered and highly complex (see for instance Buckley 2013, Petrick *et al.* 2013, Mamonova 2012, Burnod *et al.* 2013).

Hitherto research on land investments has foremost focused on the ‘global South’, with little attention for recent developments in the Central Asian region (exceptions are Petrick *et al.* 2013, Visser and Spoor 2011). In 2012, Chinese agricultural land investments have been implemented in China’s neighbouring Central Asian republic Tajikistan. These investments are remarkable in light of the scarcity of arable land and high population density in Tajikistan.¹ A point in fact is that the Chinese government is increasingly active to foster trade and bilateral relationships with the Central Asian states. Moreover, China’s increasing presence in its vicinity is also driven by the importance to develop the bordering Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. The region is an important bridge between Tajikistan and China, and social stability in the region is of utmost importance for the Chinese government.

This paper aims to contribute to fill the void in the scant research on land investments in Central Asia, and focuses on the politics of encounter in the context of Chinese land deals in Tajikistan. In so doing, this paper has the aim to add insight into the nature of ‘land grabbing’ as occurring in this region, but moreover to provide an understanding of the different ways in which land investments might unfold worldwide. As Tsing (2000, 347) states: ‘understanding the institutional proliferation of particular globalization projects requires a sense of their cultural specificities as well as the travels and interactions through which these projects are reproduced and taken on in new places.’

¹ It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss at large the actual motives behind the Chinese land investments. Officially the Chinese investments are brought to better agricultural production and cushion rural unemployment. Whether the investments are related to a territorial dispute between Tajikistan and China (the border has been shifted in 2011) is unclear. Rumours are ongoing that the Chinese government will reclaim more land, given the fact that Tajikistan has to pay off debts to China (Asia Plus 2013).

I argue that the frictions that occurred in rural Tajikistan can best be understood in light of the current socio-political and socio-economic environment in the country. The encounters that take place concur with and relate to larger struggles over access to land. Moreover, the particular nature of frictions expressed by rural inhabitants revealed their relationship with the state, and their problems in the current socio-political and economic contexts.

I have taken an inductive approach, to enter the setting with an open perspective to analyse rural politics and power dynamics at the local level, and addressed the following questions: how are the Chinese land investments perceived by rural inhabitants, which particular factors trigger responses, and what forms do responses take? Simultaneously, Bernstein's (2010) agrarian political economy questions guided this research, which allowed me to study the stratification born by agrarian change,² in order to have an understanding of how agrarian reform has shaped and reshaped social relationships.

The paper is based on fieldwork conducted between March and August 2012 in the Southwestern part of Tajikistan (see Figures 1 and 2 below). The two research sites are located in the region Khatlon, where at least six Chinese land investments have been implemented in 2012, ranging in size from 50 to 400 hectares³.

The high regional and intraregional diversity in terms of land availability, the scale of farm restructuring, ethnicity, the conditions of the fields and differences in role and power of local and district authorities made it crucial to design the research as a comparative case study. Principal research methods consisted of participant observation and semi-structured and informal interviews with individual farmers, rural households⁴ and local and district state officials, with the aim to understand local perceptions, responses and conflicts over access to land.

Doing ethnographic research in a country as Tajikistan entails numerous challenges and barriers, among which navigating ways through the repressive regime and tight controls, which subsequently affect the way in which villagers feel free to voice their opinions. It requires long-term rapport building to get better insight into the local context. And, as I briefly describe later on, local powerful people pursue several means to ensure conflicts remain secret to the outside world, which makes people cautious to speak out (see also Boboyorov 2011).

² The class dynamics of agrarian change have been largely left unexplored in Tajikistan. Exceptions are Herbers 2006, Rowe 2010/2009, Robinson et al. 2008. Most academic research in Tajikistan was conducted by political scientists (see for example Tunçer-Kilavuz 2009, Ilkhamov 2007, Heathershaw 2012), or was more of economic character. There are however various NGO and policy reports which provide insight into (regional) agricultural characteristics (see for example Porteous 2003, Lerman and Sedik 2008, Lerman and Wolfgang 2011, van Atta 2009/2008, Chemonics International Inc. 2008).

³ Before I selected the cases, I have consulted organizations working in other regions (primarily in the north, Sughd) whether they knew of Chinese agricultural activities in their locality. They did not know about Chinese land investments in their region, and therefore I decided to select two cases in Khatlon region. In 2013 however, a fellow researcher informed me that Chinese investors had been active in the Sughd region; but due to water shortages they had left (informal communication, 24-5-13).

⁴ All interview data has been coded. 40 farmers or members of farm households were interviewed in and around the village in Yavan (meeting them often multiple times), and when including landless households I conducted around 55 informal and semi-structured interviews. In the second research site, Jaloliddini Rumi, 55 rural households were interviewed. In both research areas I had numerous informal daily encounters with villagers.



Figure 1. Map of Tajikistan with indicated field locations: Yavan and Jaloliddini Rumi.

Source: United Nations 2009 (Map No. 3765 Rev. 11 October 2009)

Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/tajikist.pdf>. on 10 September 2012.

Figure 2. This map of the primary region Khatlon placed in the larger map indicates the research sites Yavan district and Jaloliddini Rumi district (here under the former name 'Kolkhozobod').

Source: Government of Tajikistan 2007, 22, Figure 4.5.

I start off with a description and chronology of agrarian reform in Tajikistan. The objective is not to provide a clear-cut picture of an accomplished process, rather to describe the chronological development of farm restructuring, and to characterise the factors that have been shaping this process. It is crucial to illuminate the entire setting in which agriculture takes place; articulations of protest, discontent or yet acceptance cannot be isolated from the setting out of which they emerge. Even more, agrarian change is indispensably related to broader social, economic and political developments. In the third section I outline the underlying theoretical framework, drawing on theories of the politics of encounter and global interactions, which formed the analytical base of this paper. The fourth section focuses on the Chinese arrival in the Tajik countryside, to shed light on the social interactions and local responses in the context of the Chinese investments. I end the paper with a final conclusion in which I intertwine the theoretical concepts with my empirical findings.

2 The Tajik background

In order to understand the context in which Chinese investments take place, this section outlines the developments and transformations that have been taking place in the rural area, divided into the Soviet era, the early 1990s, the late 1990s and the developments within agriculture that have been taken place since the last few years, which gives insight into the current socio-political and economic

contexts of rural Tajikistan. Where relevant I have made reference to the situation in the research sites Jaloliddini Rumi district and Yavan district (indicated on Figures 1 and 2).

Similar to the neighbouring post-Soviet states Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan can be characterised as a slow mover in reforming agriculture in a tokenistic approach (Trevisani 2008, Spoor 2012, Spoor 2004, Lerman *et al.* 2004, Spoor and Visser 2001). Following the ‘Washington Consensus’, capitalist modes of farming were propagated by capitalist powers and international financial institutions as being the panacea of the deteriorated agricultural sector in most of the former Union. Nonetheless, eventually individualization of farming in many of the former republics had inconclusive outcomes and appeared less successful than argued for by its advocates; agricultural production plummeted and collective structures continued to exist.

In the Tajik countryside, one still finds significant remnants of the Soviet regime and its property rights structure, which was super-imposed on historical land use rights (Herbers 2006, Robinson *et al.* 2008, Rowe 2010, Sehring 2006). Yet, although the state still holds strong control over the speed and scale of reforms, equally important are identity,⁵ patronage networks, status and personal relationships to attain surplus and higher quality land and to ‘facilitate manoeuvring within the state system’ (Small 2007, 38; Roy 2000, Rowe 2010, Rowe 2009, Herbers 2006, Boboyorov 2012, Mandler 2013). Individualisation of farming has evolved all but uniform and is marked by a clear continuation of state presence in the more resource-rich regions (Rowe 2010, Rowe 2009, Robinson *et al.* 2008, van Atta 2009).

2.1 Soviet state of agriculture: nearly 70 years of collective agriculture

Before the Soviets started with union-wide installation of large-scale farming in the 1930s, the valleys in Tajikistan were mainly inhabited by Turkic semi-nomads that grouped together in separate valleys⁶ (Roy 2000, Conolly 1967, Herbers 2006, Kassymbekova 2011). The Soviet attempt to increase agricultural produce was based on high-modernist ideology (Scott 1998), and the Soviet regime started to construct large irrigation works throughout the region that should allow for large-scale production of cotton. Land reclamation took place on a large scale, as areas were brought under cultivation that had not been used for intensive agriculture before. This contrasts with the situation in many of the other Soviet republics where collectivisation meant the usurpation of small peasant farms for the benefit of the collective (Verdery 2003, Lerman *et al.* 2004, Spoor 2012, Swinnen and Rozelle 2006).

The establishment of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhозes*⁷ necessitated substantial resettlement of people from different regions (Conolly 1967, Roy 2000, Kassymbekova 2011) and this process of forced collectivisation lasted until the 1970s (see also Boboyorov 2012).

⁵ Ethnic and regional identity might overlap or differ, and as Roy (2000) states ‘an individual will often give multiple identity references’ (Roy 2000, 18).

⁶ These were mainly Uzbek/Turkic-speaking Lakay and Karluk semi-nomads (Roy 2000, Conolly 1967, Herbers 2006, Giese 1970). The Soviet regime in Tajikistan perceived Karluk and Lakay as backward people which had to be conquered by Tajiks (Kassymbekova 2011). Under Tajik people, Karluk and Lakay are regularly portrayed in a negative way.

⁷ The difference between the two types of Soviet farms concerns mainly characteristics in management structure and ownership of the farm. Kolkhozes were collectives, with an elected leader and villagers were members of the farm, who held shares and participated in decision-making. Sovkhozes instead were owned and controlled by the state, in which workers were employed by the state. According to Herbers (2006) and Sehring (2006) the difference between the two types of Soviet farms was negligible in Tajikistan. Both types of farmers were subject to quotas for the most important crops.

Agricultural occupations and relations came to stratify rural society and farm practices were performed in firmly divided tasks. Individual households' access to land was restricted to the small household plots and appeared of great significance for with extra supplies of resources (see for instance Giese 1970, Visser 2010, Visser 2009, Rowe 2009). Cultivation of the small plots was enabled by the symbiotic relationship between households' production and cultivation of the larger kolkhoz and sovkhoz fields (Giese 1970, Visser 2010, Visser 2009, Rowe 2009).

2.2 The early 1990s: first initiatives towards farm restructuring

With independence a process of land use rights distribution started, which introduced individual access to land. This implied that individuals, families and collectives were enabled to apply for farmland of former *kolkhozes* and *sovkozes*. The first laws intended to pursue agrarian reform were implemented in 1992 with the Law on Dehqan⁸ Farms and the Law on Land Reform.

Yet the turmoil of five years of civil war (1992-1997) interrupted the process of farm restructuring. It deeply impacted on the social relationships and cohesion among people in the countryside. An upheaval of governmental officials from the top governmental to the lowest governmental levels created frictions that remain to the present day. The President's intimae gained authority in several districts, and also became prominent figures in agriculture. This still affects the relationship and trust between villagers and their local authorities.

In 1995 and 1997 the government responded to the fragile situation of food insecure households by granting them 'presidential land' (*Zamini Presidenti*) (Robinson *et al.* 2008, Herbers 2006). These plots were added to households' kitchen gardens (*agorod* or *tamorqa*) to provide villagers with a minimum safety net.

2.3 Late 1990s and early 2000s: economic recovery and further steps towards individual farming

New steps towards farm re-organisation were taken after the civil war. With the Land Code adopted in 1996 the number of *dehqan* farms increased substantially (Herbers 2006). The majority of the former Soviet collectives were initially transformed into smaller collective *dehqan* farms, without much change in management structure and labour relations. Restructured Soviet farm entities that continued after the civil war were heavily downgraded, since fields had been unused for a number of years (van Atta 2009). Yet since 1998 recovery of agricultural production was observed (Lerman and Sedik 2008, Lerman 2008, Spoor and Visser 2001).

The dismantling of collectives took place only gradually. There were a number of interrelated barriers towards further restructuring: first, the primacy of cotton production made authorities cautious to divide fields. Notably the state, and entangled *biznesmen*⁹ (lit. 'business men'), and a class of *kolhozi*

⁸The term 'dehqan' denotes 'peasant' in Tajik. After decollectivisation all individualised farms became known as 'dehqan farms'. In subsequent years a distinction was made between collective dehqan farms, family dehqan farms, related to differences in ownership structure and decision-making procedures (I describe this later in the main text). As rightly pointed out by Robinson *et al.* (2008, 173), 'the term dekhan farm can in fact be more closely translated as private farm in English.' In this paper I use the term dehqan farm to denote the individualized farm with land use rights according to the Law on Dehqan Farms.

⁹The term *biznesmen* is widely used in Central Asia to denote people who derive their income from commercial or industrial capital. They are former state officials, directors of privatized state companies; their businesses might have been established with the privatization of socialist property, which enabled them to capture and accumulate capital and former state assets. In other instances, capital has been accumulated more independently. In general, *biznesmen* hold strong ties with local and district officials, which is crucial to continue and expand their businesses.

elite continued, and still continue to control the cotton sector (van Atta 2009, van Atta 2008, Boboyorov 2012).

Upper classes' (former *kolkhoz* and *sovkhоз* leadership, hereafter *kolkhozi* elite) interest in agricultural production,¹⁰ particularly in the agriculturally well-endowed Khatlon region, meant that they had primary interest to retain control over crop production and sales (Herbers 2006, Porteous 2003, Robinson *et al.* 2008, Boboyorov 2011). Agricultural production was the 'milking cow for other sectors to develop' (Spoor 2013, 13). For these reasons, the dissolution of collectives has been a much longer burdensome process than reform of the state-owned farms. Sometimes reform merely took place in disguise, i.e. a change in name (see also Herbers 2006, Spoor and Visser 2001). Although the number of individual farms increased in the late 1990s, which might exemplify a well-progressed process of decollectivisation, still over 60 per cent of agricultural land was not privatised by 2002 (Herbers 2006, 117). One should however bear in mind that both the political and economic climate of that time was not conducive for private farming to develop, as was the case in most of the former-Soviet Union in the first decade of independence (see also Wegren 2005).

In 2002 the Law on Dehqan Farms was revised to further stimulate rural dwellers to start an individual farm. In the revised law the distinction was made between *individual* and *family dehqan* farms, and *collective dehqan* farms¹¹ (Robinson *et al.* 2008).

In the primarily cotton producing districts, the cotton debts incurred in earlier years¹² remained significant barriers towards more meaningful reform. Owing to inadequate production of crops produced under contract, many of the large former-Soviet farms had been unable to meet the forward signed contracts (mainly with so-called futurists, cotton investment companies) for a consecutive numbers of years, which resulted in substantial accumulation of debts.

A President's Decree in 2003 determined that debts of restructured farm units were passed on to new farmers (van Atta 2009). The debts were calculated per hectare, and new individual farmers had no choice but to cultivate cotton to pay-off debts¹³ (*ibid.*, Lerman and Sedik 2008, Lerman 2008). The Decree in 2003 proved insufficient, and in 2007 the government Decree 111 on cotton debt resolution was brought as the final means to solve the debts, which had increased to over 400 million US Dollars (van Atta 2009, Lerman 2008, see also Government of Tajikistan 2007). With the Decree the government would pay off all existing debt, and newly created farm entities would no longer be

¹⁰ Allina-Pisano (2008) provides an additional factor that explains the slow pace in land reforms. In her research on agrarian change in the Russian-Ukrainian Black Earth region she describes the hidden insubordination of local officials against top down farm restructuring, first of all in order to secure their control, but as well in order to cushion the potentially drastic implications of decollectivisation on the rural population.

¹¹ In collective dehqan farms – similar to the former Soviet collectives – all members formally hold land shares and decision-making is in the hands of members the collective. In the case of family dehqan farms, shares and decisions are in hands of family members, as opposed to the individual dehqan farms where one person decides upon the entire production and labour process. In many instances however, the difference between the farm types is not noticeable since often one person (most often the male household head) holds the primary decision-making power over the farm (see also Robinson *et al.* 2008, Chemonics International Inc. 2008, Bakozoda *et al.* 2011, Lerman and Wolfgramm 2011).

¹² It goes beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the cotton sector and the development of the debts. Don van Atta (2009/2008) extensively described the problems of the cotton debts and the political economy of cotton (see also Boboyorov 2012, Asadov 2013).

¹³ Officially state quotas for cotton are abolished, however, they are still set in a more informal way, for which villagers are mobilised to work in order to fulfill the plans (Boboyorov 2012/2011). Farmers in my research responded differently to questions about farm quotas. Some were decided that quotas were things of the Soviet era, whilst others told that they had to cultivate 70 per cent of their land with cotton.

forced to grow cotton. Starting a farm might include paying-off debt, sometimes up to 1,000 US Dollars. It tightens farmers on external production relations and restricts their freedom to farm.¹⁴

A Government Resolution followed in 2009 to officially write off debts (Asadov 2013). Yet in several districts, such as in Jaloliddini Rumi, debts remained, and many farmers are puzzled how debts continued to exist, or had been created in the years after 2008.

2.4 The present: domestic competition over land

Despite the constraints imposed by the debts, over the years the number of *dehqan* farms has increased substantially. Between 2005 and 2010, the number of *dehqan* farms more than doubled (here ‘*dehqan* farms’ includes collective, family and individual ones), whereas the number of collective and state farms decreased by over 90 per cent (TajStat 2011, 98). By the year 2010, 62 per cent of the total agricultural production came from household plots, against 30 per cent by *dehqan* farms, and the remaining 8 per cent by collective farms and agricultural state enterprises (TajStat 2011, 95). These figures exemplify the importance of small household plot production, although they do not provide indications of the extent to which output was actually marketed.¹⁵ The total increase in agricultural output is attributed, first of all, to an increase in the amount of land under cultivation, rather than an increase in actual productivity (Asadov 2013).

Alongside the growing numbers of individual and family *dehqan* farms, an observation made in hindsight is that decollectivisation has seen the emergence of large landholdings in the hands of the landed class of *kolkhozi* elites (Boboyorov 2011), and domestic *biznesmen*, who hold strong ties with the presidential apparatus or with the regional and district authorities. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialist property is being transformed into private forms of property, which subsequently created opportunities for capitalist modes of farming to emerge and expand, separating haves, who gained from the opening up of resources, and have-nots, who had no ability to prosper (Tsing 2005, Harvey 2003).

Due to the fact that the state remains the sole owner of land, farmers are actually shareholders (of state-owned land) rather than independent agricultural producers; the newly established individual farmers are regularly confronted with tight controls by local or district authorities whilst the more powerful farmers with connections to local or district authorities operate with fewer restrictions.

Important amendments to the Land Code and Law on Dehqan Farms were adopted in 2012, in which international donors, such as USAID, have advised the Tajik government to incorporate market mechanisms to enforce a more market-led agrarian reform. With the revised legislation, land use rights have become tradable, and furthermore, land can be mortgaged, which should improve farmers’ access to credits (interview 15-8-12). Importantly, the Land Code and Law on Dehqan Farms do not stipulate ceilings on farm sizes, which has enabled powerful persons to accumulate land without much restriction. And not only did *biznesmen* and landed classes create monopolies in agricultural land, but also the entire cotton sector (from production, to ginneries, to export) is in their hands (see also van Atta 2009, van Atta 2008, Boboyorov 2012, Boboyorov 2011, SOAS 2010). Thus, the new legislation might result in further inequalities in landholdings and spur accumulation of land by the powerful, particularly since size ceilings are absent.

¹⁴ As Boboyorov (2012) describes, the debt system creates dependency and personal indebtedness. For several farmers in Boboyorov’s study, debts were frozen up to the moment when a farmer would start making profit.

¹⁵ The last years (2005-2011) were marked by a considerable shift in crops cultivated; most importantly cultivation of cotton and animal fodder declined by 40 and 35 per cent, respectively, whereas wheat production more than doubled (Asadov 2013, 16).

2.5 Key features in regulation that influence patterns of farm ownership and production at present

The application to start a farm follows a procedure that has to pass different levels of government¹⁶ (Land Code of RT Art. 26, Art. 27). The final approval of farm applications is in hands of the district authorities, but the *jamoat* authorities are the gateway to become a farmer. The costs involved to establish a farm are officially low, as only costs for registration are demanded, but several farmers indicate openly that money speeds up the application process, and helps to attain access to better fields.

An accepted application is registered at the State Agency for Land Management, Geodesy and Cartography, functioning at lower levels under the name of the Land Committee (*Kumitai zaminozoi*). Once registered, the head of the farm and the farm members receive their certificate, which states their share of the field and indicates the location of the plot. A delegate of the Land Committee based at the *jamoat* office monitors and controls farmers' actual use of the fields. Non-rational and 'non-use' of fields for two years can be a reason for authorities to reclaim fields. Hence, actual prolongation of farming is determined by local and district authorities, and reasons for reclamation of farm land are sometimes unclear. Leaving land fallow – which would benefit soil fertility – is not allowed. Yet it also happens that the district authorities refuse to accept a farmer's decision to abandon farming, when the farmer him or herself perceives it too difficult to farm. When the authorities refuse to take back the fields in such a situation, farmers are forced to continue paying agricultural taxes without having any benefits. The continuation of farming therefore depends upon farmers' ability to negotiate – their political and social capital, but also financial capital (see also Herbers 2006).

A critical issue is the lack of rights' awareness, or 'legal illiteracy' (Sehring 2006, 29) among farmers, farm members and rural households (Chemonics International Inc. 2008, Bakozoda *et al.* 2011, Lerman and Wolfgramm 2011). New individual farmers have no expertise in running the multiple practices that individual farming requires, since their experience is limited due to the specified task division in their former work.

In the past few years, a network of NGOs has initiated a project for the establishment of 'Rural Legal Aid Networks' where villagers and farmers can request support and ask for information. My observation is that the success of these centres is inconclusive and varies from locality to locality.¹⁷ Farmers' associations, which could play a role in the mobilisation of rural society hardly exist. As Herbers (2006) identified, farmers' associations often serve the cotton sector instead of empowering individual farmers. Herbers (2006) furthermore concludes in her research on agrarian reform in Tajikistan, that strategic groups¹⁸ (cf. Evers 2001) did not emerge in the wake of farm restructuring.

¹⁶ The structure, visibility and power held by local governments differ considerably among different districts (raions), *jamoats* and mahallas. The state structure in Tajikistan is divided into provinces oblasts (RU)/viloyats (Tajik) with their own provincial governments, raions (RU)/nohiya (Tajik), and *jamoats* (sub-districts). Regional and district governors are appointed by the president, and since 2009 *jamoat* leaders are appointed by district authorities (the hukumat). *Jamoats* include a number of mahallas (villages or neighbourhoods), which would have existed for centuries as traditional forms of local self-governance in settlement areas with sedentary agriculture. Mahalla leaders are elected by local inhabitants (Freizer 2004, Mandler 2013). After the Soviet Union mahallas regained their importance as local institutions, although in the rural area they always have kept their primacy (Freizer 2004, see also Sehring 2006).

¹⁷ One such an office was located in a *jamoat* office which I visited a number of times. Staff of the *jamoat* could not provide information on the project.

¹⁸ Following Evers (2001, see also Herbers 2006), decolonisation, market transition, and decollectivisation and agrarian change (Herbers 2006), open up (access to) new resources. In such a context, strategic groups might emerge, existing of people who share interests to obtain these resources jointly (Evers 2001, see also Herbers

Local *biznesmen* and *kolkhozi* elites pursue their goals for maximum benefits individually by help of family ties and powerful connections, and most farmers struggle with authorities and their fields on their own and are annoyed about others' lack of action. This severely hampers betterment of agriculture and their individual know-how and socio-economic well-being. Moreover, due to the high numbers of male migration, female-headed households are left behind. In the Tajik context, women are not expected to participate in decision-making processes or voice their concerns (see also Boboyorov 2011).

The preceding chronology shows that several processes have been set in motion since independence. The large Soviet *kolkhozes* and former *sovkhозes* have been transformed stepwise into smaller collective, family and individual *dehqan* farms. The overall majority of *dehqan* farms remain below 30 hectares, but large landholdings of significant size have reappeared. The array of actors in agriculture includes furthermore rural families producing food on their small household plots, and a small group of state and public farms that cultivates a still diminishing part of arable land.

On the whole, socio-economic inequalities have increased after independence, a process in which particular well-connected individuals have been able to benefit from the (partial) privatisation of formerly socialist property and state assets. The political economy of cotton has facilitated the accumulation of capital by the well-connected; the strictly controlled cotton industry has become a way in which a class of local and national *biznesmen* and a landed class comprised by former *kolkhoz* and *sovkhоз* directors exploit less powerful farmers and rural households. In sum: the well-connected upper classes enjoy the freedom and ability to accumulate capital through their agricultural holdings, whilst smaller farmers and landless rural households face significant difficulties to making a living. In the following, I come to discuss the main theories that formed the theoretical framework of this paper, and which help to understand the responses of rural dwellers to the Chinese land investments in Tajikistan.

3 Understanding responses from below: the politics of encounter

As new forms of global capitalism and globalization projects materialise, peripheral areas, resource frontiers and closed communities become exposed to foreign, state and corporate actors, seeking to extract resources to accumulate power or capital (Tsing 2005, Tsing 2000, Harvey 2003, Winslow 2007, Peluso and Lund 2011, Petrick et al. 2013). The cessation of the Soviet Union provided a grand impetus for new global flows and extraction of much-wanted resources, with socialist forms of property transforming into capitalist ones. As David Harvey (2003, 149) in 'The New Imperialism' states: 'The collapse of the Soviet Union and then the opening up of China entailed a massive release of hitherto unavailable assets into the mainstream of capital accumulation.'

The ongoing search for hitherto undiscovered land resources is exemplified by the development of global land grabbing in the past five years. The rationale behind the different land deals highly varies, as does the maturing of land deals in reality. Their unfolding concur with patterns of interaction between 'investor' and 'local', between 'foreign' and 'domestic', or between 'state' and 'society' (Tsing 2000, Winslow 2007). These interactions and encounters are multilayered and differ among and within local settings, and among and within classes in society (see for instance Burnod et al. 2013, Mamonova 2012, Buckley 2013, Petrick et al. 2013).

2006). 'Strategische Gruppen bestehen also aus Personen, die durch ein gemeinsames Interesse an der Erhaltung oder Erweiterung ihrer gemeinsamen Aneignungschancen verbunden sind. Diese Aneignungschancen sind nicht allein auf materielle Güter ausgerichtet, sondern können auch Wissen, Prestige, Macht oder religiöse Ziele beinhalten' (Evers 2001, 166).

'Land grabs' are 'neither inevitable nor predetermined. Local and global, cultural and material, never totally subsume each other' (Winslow 2007, 59). It is local processes, which mould global forces and define their outcomes on the ground. 'Power differences among actors emerge not as an effect of reach per se – that is, global is not necessarily more potent than local; instead, it is the relative capacity to control one's own life, to mobilize resources, and to create local and extra-local effects, that explains who has power and who does not' (Winslow 2007, 66).

Hence, the implementation and impact of land grabbing as occurring worldwide has no predetermined outcome. There are examples of radical physical changes in landscapes, such as deforestation and introduction of large-scale monoculture agriculture. Yet other land investments do not alter the physical outlook of the local setting, but drastically change social relations and people's access to land and to the other factors of production.

Examples abound on the different ways in which globalization projects and the current rush for resources encounters an array of responses from below (examples on global interactions for instance Tsing 2005, Lee 2009, on land investments see Mamonova 2012, Buckley 2013, Burnod et al. 2013, Petrick et al. 2013, Demytrie 2010). Whereas some announced land deals are cancelled after mass protests, such as the oft-mentioned Daewoo deal in Madagascar and an announced Chinese land investment in Kazakhstan in 2009, other land acquisitions encounter less resistance or even seemed to be welcomed by host populations. Investors might establish alliances with particular groups in the host country, striving to establish a permanent relationship to secure implementation and continuation.

Global projects do not just 'remake the world just as they want' (Tsing 2000, 330), as they articulate with power relations and political struggles on the ground, in national, regional or local arenas. The interactions between investors as regularly being 'foreign' or 'external' actors, might reveal power relations, people's perception of their life-world and the way in which they exploit their agency to mould their everyday lives (Tsing 2000).

Individual autonomy and agency are often thought to be limited in former Soviet states, and in Central Asia in particular. '*Resistance from below*, whether of the organized/structured type or otherwise, is present in many countries, but are rather general [sic] thin, weak and uneven. This is (...) a situation most probably in former Soviet Eurasia' (Borras et al. 2011, 7, see also O'Brien et al. 2004, Wall 2007). An often provided explanation for the individual and collective action and civic quiescence in Tajikistan is the country's authoritarian regime that suppresses civic uprisings. Moreover, as a legacy of the five years lasting civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s, many people fear a re-emergence of regional conflicts.¹⁹ These socio-political factors of today's Tajikistan, playing out at both the local and the national levels, severely restrict rural society's perception of opportunities to voice concerns. Boboyorov (2011) observed moreover, that local state officials and landed classes in Tajikistan seek to settle and repress local disputes over socio-economic inequalities. They use discourses of village cohesion and collective honour as on-site mechanisms to avoid people's approach to courts.

However, regardless the character of the socio-political environment, land deals and development schemes do not unfold following their perfect blueprints. Frictions inevitably occur, in which local conditions mediate the outcome of initial designs.

¹⁹ The civil war that lasted between 1992 and 1997 marks the Tajik society up until today. In the summer of 2012 civil unrest in the autonomous area in the eastern Pamir mountains, Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) caused many deaths, in which the government played a dubious role. Throughout the country people were afraid that conflicts that resulted in the civil war in the 1990s would re-emerge.

If one intends to understand outcomes of global processes in reality, cultural encounters are one of the primary aspects required to take in to account. As Long (2004, 24) states, this requires an ethnographic study, to 'reveal the nature of (...) relations in particular localities'. One needs to conduct an ethnographic study to understand how global flows become moulded and mediated by local conditions (Winslow 2007). Land grabs might encounter opposition, contestation or acceptance in the host country, by individuals and groups at national, regional or local level.

In the following section, I describe the local encounters that took place with the arrival of Chinese investors, and I seek to characterise the frictions that subsequently came to the surface. 'The task of understanding planet-wide interconnections requires locating and specifying globalist projects (...), with their contradictory as well as charismatic logics and their messy as well as effective encounters and translations' (Tsing 2000, 330).

4 Everyday encounters in the realm of Chinese agricultural land investments

Following the preceding sections in which I layed out dynamics of agrarian reform in Tajikistan, one may understand that the context in which Chinese land investments takes place is highly dynamic. In this part I seek to describe and characterise the interactions and encounters that took place on the ground. These interfaces and the expressions they triggered are in several ways related to and seemed part and parcel of rural households' position in the ongoing process of agrarian reform, and the struggles over access to land. Instead of stand-alone frictions, the confrontations between Tajik villagers and Chinese people revealed villagers' perceptions of the status quo in terms of their access to land, and their relation to the state. Yet, before diving into these local dynamics, I briefly paint the local setting in which the Chinese investments take place.

4.1 Characteristics of the research sites

The two research sites, Yavan and Jaloliddini Rumi, contrast considerably in terms of resource endowments and in terms of the actors involved²⁰ in farming (described shortly hereafter). In the district Yavan, located at approximately 40 kilometres from the capital Dushanbe, agriculture allows for commercial crop production. It is one of the districts in Khatlon with the highest amount of irrigated fields (over 21,000 ha) (Government of Tajikistan 2007). The district can be considered as relatively rich in agricultural endowments with fertile soils (*ibid.*). An interesting indication of the potential for crop production might be the presence of the French company ECOM, which started in 2011 in Yavan to purchase cotton from local farmers and increase awareness on sustainable land use management.

The actual year of the *sovkhоз*'s dissolution in Yavan is unclear, but since 2004 individual and family *dehqan* farms make up the majority of land users²¹ (Interviews 19-5-12, 26-5-12); most *dehqan*

²⁰ Here I mainly aim to refer to the state institutions involved in agriculture and the extent to which local and regional authorities intervene in farmers' practices. Moreover, there are relevant differences in the background of mainly large farms. This is described later on in the main text. What is more, in Yavan, 60 per cent of the village population is part of the Uzbek-speaking Karluk minority. I do not give it much attention here because my impression is that there was no significant difference between Karluk and Tajik people in terms of access to land. In daily life, however, there is an apparent division between the two groups in terms of schooling (the school consists of two separate divisions for Uzbek and Tajik speakers), and livelihood sources (Karluk are regularly engaged in livestock holding). Among the Karluk I met in the village, the majority seem to have low self-esteem. This could impact the way in which people express their emotions, but I did not observe apparent differences between people.

²¹ According to the district authorities, there are now over 2,400 *dehqan* farms in Yavan (including collective, family and individual *dehqan* farms), with an average farm size below 50 hectares (Interview, 19-5-12).

farmers interviewed²² started between 2004 and 2007. In terms of farm size there are some major exceptions, with which I mean that there are a few farms that comprise a significant area as compared to the numerous smaller ones. One of the most prominent figures in the Tajik government,²³ the current deputy prime minister and notably in charge of agrarian reforms, has over 200 hectares in the surrounding area. He controls five agricultural firms that operate in the area (engaged in different subsectors such as livestock, animal fodder, cotton), and in total these firms comprise over 600 hectares in Yavan, while some locals mentioned over 1,000 hectares (Interviews 28-5-12, 29-5-12). His monopoly on land holdings and agro-firms in Yavan is not unique, since he has large swaths of land in several districts in Khatlon, and he is also involved in the cotton investment companies. Most villagers speak with disrespect about the deputy prime minister, as he took the best fields under the best conditions. ‘Only rich people have such flocks [IH: this person had large flocks which passed through the village before arriving at the summer pastures]. He has about half of the land in Yavan, he can buy everything’ (Interview, 31-5-12).

The district Jaloliddini Rumi is located further south, circa 140 kilometres from the capital Dushanbe, and in winter the area is isolated from any urban area, which constrains economic exchanges with other districts. Contrasting the relatively good conditions in Yavan, agricultural production in this Southern district is constrained by highly salinised soils. Drainage canals have not been properly maintained for a consecutive number of years. During the Soviet era, the southern districts were known for their citrus production, and the area benefited from highly qualified research centres.

Opposed to the physical outlook of agriculture in Yavan, in which the Soviet type of farm entirely disappeared, in Jaloliddini Rumi collective farming continues to exist. In this district the overall majority of the farm households²⁴ commenced with an individual or family *dehqan* farm only in the last two years (based on conversations with farmers but also with officials overseeing the changes over the years). Farm sizes range between 2 and 30 hectares.²⁵ Although individual *dehqan* farms outnumber the number of collective *dehqan* farms nowadays, a few large collective ones are still of importance, which are led by former *kolkhoz* directors (*kolkhozi* elites). One of these remaining collectives is regarded as the remnant of the former *kolkhoz*, and while the farm has lost importance for local employment, many villagers reason that the *kolkhoz* still exists.²⁶ It was their main institution for decades, and the *kolkhoz* office is still in use by the staff of this collective. Particular plots belonging to the former *kolkhoz* are rented out to lessees, which are mainly villagers.

Hence, whereas the districts Yavan and Jaloliddini Rumi differ considerably in terms of agricultural endowments, in both areas agrarian reform has opened up possibilities for landed classes (former *kolkhozi* elites) and local and national *biznesmen* to grab potentially valuable assets, primarily land. They employ villagers for wage labour in which patron-client relations play an important role (Boboyorov 2011). Rural households that manage to start farming with less social and financial

²² My tentative estimate is that the average size is around 10 hectares.

²³ As some people asked my translator: ‘Are you actually Tajik?’ Implying: If you are Tajik, how is it possible that you do not know him? Mr. XXX is supposed to be one of the richest individuals of the country. He has been involved in financial scandals in the past, after which he was appointed as deputy Prime (see also BTI 2012, van Atta 2009).

²⁴ This statement does not only regard the farmers interviewed but is confirmed by literature and statistical data. Based on my qualitative interviews, an average farm is below ten hectares.

²⁵ Today there are around 2,300 *dehqan* farms in Jaloliddini Rumi (this number includes collective, family and private *dehqan* farms) of which over 450 farms in the surrounding of the village Chilsolagi (in the jamoat Frunze, comprising three villages) (Interviews, 8-8-12, 17-7-12).

²⁶ This collective remained as the largest farm unit after step-wise restructuring of the former *kolkhoz*. Its size shrank considerably in the last decade, from 1,591 hectare in 1999 (Herbers 2006, 131) to approximately 600 hectares in 2012 (my estimates).

capital can establish farms generally up to 30 hectares, and rural households without access to farm land actively diversify their livelihoods and cultivate social networks to make a living.

4.2 The Chinese arrival

Chinese investors²⁷ arrived in spring 2012 in different districts in the region Khatlon (see indications on Figures 1 and 2). In Yavan district, Chinese team working for the company settled in an old garage at distance from the village. Over time I understood that there were different Chinese teams who worked on fields in different *jamoats* in the surrounding of the village. Villagers seemed not aware of the scale of the Chinese investments – in 2012 at least six different Chinese investments were implemented in Khatlon region – since they only noticed activities on the fields near their house. Notably, physical village boundaries are not of much importance for farmers. Households living in the village have their farm fields in neighbouring communities, and vice versa.

In the district Jaloliddini Rumi, the Chinese workers settled in the former *kolkhoz* office in the centre of the village. Villagers stated that they had not been informed before the Chinese arrival, but rumours had circulated since early this year that Chinese people would come to start farming, and power cuts would be history. According to some farmers, the *jamoat* staff had gone around telling farmers to take more land, otherwise the fields would be given to interested Afghans or Chinese. Others said they had not heard anything. When I asked the Land Committee if people had been informed about Chinese investments, the director confirmed ‘certainly, we hang a note, we hang it here, and there’ (Interview, 8-8-12). However, villagers were told that the actual arrival of the Chinese people in April had been a spectacle.

Media reported that Chinese investment in Jaloliddini Rumi concerned the Chinese company ‘Jiang Qing’ (see also note 29, Asadov (2013) reported a different name), which would cultivate 412 hectares, and invest two billion US Dollars to restore the fields (Central Asia Economy Newswire 2012). Last autumn a Chinese expedition had visited the *jamoat* to explore the situation and to inspect the fields. The *jamoat* leader told me that they would sell their produce on the Tajik market since this would be the most profitable option (Interview, 17-7-12). It was argued that the fields allocated to the Chinese group in Jaloliddini Rumi were uncultivated for several years, and locals had not shown interest to take it. Hence, neither the Chinese company nor the authorities dispossessed farmers in a direct manner, and the land deal did not result in displacement of people – which are regular parts of the discourse and critique on ‘land grabs’ (Borras and Franco 2012, Kenney-Lazar 2012, Levien 2013).

The fact that the Chinese investments are backed by a bilateral treaty²⁸ was used by the local authorities to justify their inaction – i.e. they were not responsive to villagers’ protest, which I describe later on – and according to the district Land Committee, the Chinese land investment was

²⁷ Asadov (2013) reports that it is the Chinese company Szinnyan Inhai LLC. According to villagers, the company for which the Chinese people work is based in Dushanbe. I sometimes find difficulties to refer to ‘the Chinese’, because encounters on the fields and in the village between Tajik and Chinese people were individual situations. It is therefore that I only incidentally call the Chinese ‘investors’. ‘Investor’ is a very abstract term. ‘Farmers’, instead, tends to be interpreted as being individual farmers. I decided to henceforth refer to the Chinese individuals mostly as ‘workers’, and in some cases as ‘team’, or ‘company’, with which I particularly refer to the group of Chinese individuals who execute the work on the fields.

²⁸ See also note 3. Official information about the Chinese investments has remained vague, besides small items on the Tajik television, which addressed the inability of the Tajik farmers, and in which was stated that the Chinese company would improve local food production and recover the soils. The rationale behind the Chinese investment ‘is an open question’, an NGO representative said me (Interview, 31-5-13). My main point here is that local and district authorities seemed to justify their lack of responsiveness with the accord concluded at the national state level.

agreed upon with the district authorities (the *hukumat*). ‘China is the only country that will carry out long-term cooperation with Tajikistan in the agricultural sector’, said the District governor of Jaloliddini Rumi on cctv.com.²⁹ In Jaloliddini Rumi the *jamoat* leader repeated the district governor’s words, stating that the Chinese investment would cushion local unemployment. Villagers would earn a good salary when working for the Chinese company, which would pay over 900 Tajik Somoni per month, which highly contrasts with an average salary from agricultural work of 144 Tajik Somoni per month in 2012³⁰ (see TajStat 2010, TajStat 2012).

The authority and power held by the *jamoat* leader, and his role and involvement in local agriculture differs considerably among different localities in Tajikistan (see also note 18). This is exemplified by contrasting the role the *jamoat* leader in Jaloliddini Rumi, to the role of the *jamoat* leader in the village in Yavan. I noticed that the *jamoat* leader in Jaloliddini Rumi governed the locality predominantly from behind his desk. Besides formal occasions and bureaucratic needs, there was only little contact between the *jamoat* and villagers, as people often told me that the *jamoat* leader never passed by, although his office was at the entrance of the village.

Instead, the *jamoat* leader in Yavan had a dominant appearance in the fields; he regularly compelled farmers to do their work instead of going to the district centre for needless things. Whenever the Chinese people were working on the fields, in particular when villagers were working for the Chinese people, the *jamoat* leader’s white Lada was parked at the side of the main road to oversee the work. He exerted much authority. In order to secure labourers for the Chinese people, the *jamoat* leader had appointed the *raisi*³¹ *mahalla* (the leader of the *mahalla*: local body of self-governance, see also note 18) as *brigadir*³² of the nearby Chinese fields. When the Chinese people needed workers, the *mahalla* leader received a phone call from the *jamoat* leader with the demand to mobilise villagers.³³

4.3 Conflicting land demands

Villagers frequently showed a lack of trust in the authorities in the transparency in the regulation of land distribution. For unclear reasons, particular fields appeared unobtainable for local farmers. One farmer in Yavan repeatedly applied for prolongation for the use of his fields, but he could not get the documents in order. He did not know why, but he could get other fields instead (Interview, 27-6-12). ‘The *hukumat* [district government] tells us we have to use all the fields, but there are useless fields, a farmer in Yavan told me (Interview, 28-6-12). Some of the idle lying fields were highly salinised, however, other ones were soon usurped by the large land holdings already present in the vicinity, but the way in which this happened remained opaque for many, including myself.

²⁹ Trade with China was marginal during the Soviet Union. Since 1998 more substantive trade has taking place (Jonson 2006, ICG 2013). Nowadays, Tajikistan is the largest receptor of Chinese loans in Central Asia, and the trade between the two countries is still expanding. More than a third of Tajik debt is tied to Chinese credit (Peyrouse 2011, 2, see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, ICG 2013, and http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113453.pdf).

³⁰ Women are regularly not paid salary in cash at all for their work on cotton fields, but merely in kind of cotton stalks after harvesting of cotton seeds. Cash income from work on the fields comes then merely with harvesting of the seeds (see also SOAS 2010). Boboyorov (2011, 121) describes that paying women in cash is uncommon, and is believed to make ‘women and juniors arrogant and alien to their families’.

³¹ The term ‘*raisi*’ or ‘*raisi*’ denotes leader; ‘someone with commitment to patronage, that is, political benevolence and economic generosity’ (Boboyorov 2011, 183). The term applies to leaders of all kinds of businesses and activities; farms, schools, authorities, and so on and so forth.

³² *Brigades* were production units on the former Soviet *kolkhozes* and *sovkhозes*, which were headed by so-called *brigadirs* who were responsible for the management of the fields, i.e. appointing workers and making particular (short term) decisions related to the cultivation of crops. This term is still in use in rural Tajikistan, and refers to the manager of fields belonging to a particular farm.

³³ Interestingly Boboyorov (2011) observed that *mahalla* leaders and other religious and (informal) local leaders mediate between *kolkhozi* elites and villagers.

Interestingly, some years ago Iranians had cultivated cotton and watermelon, and they employed some villagers for the fieldwork. A part of fields where the Iranians farmed was thereafter heavily degraded and unused. Since this year other Iranian investors have brought fields under cultivation.³⁴ Villagers related the presence of the foreigners (Iranians and Chinese) to the large landholder (see note 25) in the area. ‘When ‘XXX’ went bankrupt, the Iranian and Chinese started farming’, one young farmer told me (Interview, 10-5-12). Some villagers had the impression that the Iranian people had finished their work, and that the Chinese had followed suit. Some confused the Iranian investment with the Chinese one. Frequently, in a shared taxi on my way to the field, passengers asked my translator and me if we were farming in the village, or if we were going to buy land in the area. Once I told people in the district centre about my Dutch nationality and my work in the village, this made them conclude that Dutch investors also had started farming in the vicinity, after the Iranian and Chinese. I had the impression that villagers perceived the presence of non-locals on the fields as a given, and that they believed the presence of the foreigners to have common connections. The Chinese investments in Khatlon concern leasehold agreements for 50 years, while most farmers do not know for how long they can cultivate their fields, as it all depended on ‘the structure of the government’ (an exact translated answer by most farmers on my question for how long they could use the fields).

Notably the fields of the prominent *biznesmen*, the Iranian investor, and the Chinese company, were all on the same side of the village where fields are relatively good (Interview, 29-5-12). According to a wageworker of the Iranian ‘investor’, the field belonged to ‘the mafia of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture’ (*ibid.*), and many villagers did not know much about the Iranian farm activities. Whereas the Chinese team regularly employed villagers, the work on the fields of the Iranian was only in some instances done by tractor drivers from the village. Interestingly, in contrast to Tajik perceptions of Chinese people and China, Iran is often regarded as a former ally, a linguistic brother with a shared history and identity. Apparently a feeling of brotherhood did not appear here.

4.4 Socio-economic inequalities and capital constraints to farm

In the perception of villagers, under the current conditions farming offers only little potential for profits and to act as the main source of livelihood, as villagers lack the capital and skills to make farming more than a source of sustenance. Capital requirements to start a farm, needed for capital investments and purchase of inputs, are considerably constraining locals to start a farm. Salaries for land labourers are marginal, meaning that starting a farm is only possible for those with other sources of income.³⁵ ‘Perhaps, if I work 100 years on the fields, I can start farming’, an older woman told me, whose sons all had left to Russia (Interview, 25-6-12). When I asked an agronomist in Yavan if it was necessary to reserve land for local farmers, or to protect them in a sense that locals would be preferred to apply for land, he responded: ‘Protection? We do not even think about it’ (Interview, 28-6-12). Nevertheless some villagers saw it as their duty to farm the local fields. It was against their dignity to migrate to Russia.³⁶ Parents sometimes forbid their children to leave, they wanted their children to stay and take care of the household. As a young boy told me ‘In Russia you also have to work hard, I have no choice because my father disagrees. Who will take care of the fields and the cows?’ (Interview, 27-6-12).

³⁴ Since the last few years, Iranian involvement in agriculture in Tajikistan is increasing. In 2012 Iranian would start working on 5,000 hectares in the very South of Tajikistan (Interview, 29-5-12).

³⁵ Whereas wages and salaries in other sectors of the economy have increased significantly in the last 10 years – even some increase by 400-600 per cent – agricultural wages remain strikingly low. Remarkably sales from agricultural production declined in relative weight of individual income, from a percentage of 31.3 per cent in 2004, to 17.8 per cent in 2009 (TajStat 2010, 60).

³⁶ As Verdery (2003, 9) states in the context of Romania: ‘villagers saw land rights as a means to assert their dignity and worth and as a basis for current livelihood and future security’.

Villagers in Yavan district seemed to accept the high inequalities and people did not have the energy or feel the need to protest.³⁷ Interestingly, instead of this *seemingly* fatalist response I observed in Yavan, many villagers in the village in Jaloliddini Rumi district expressed a clear wish to start farming. They were of the opinion that it was their responsibility to farm the fields; they should do the work themselves instead of giving away land to China. Farming is constrained by salinised soils, and by the deteriorated and impoverished water systems. Farmers who cannot produce adequate yields, have to renegotiate the payment of land taxes regularly with the local and district authorities, and a number of farmers considered to return a part of their lands to the district authorities. Negotiations are tough and lengthy, and seem first of all issues of clientelism and require loyalty and social capital. Many farmers simply have to navigate through authorities and institutions, and visit the offices frequently to get things done

Nonetheless, despite all the problems, and the necessity of migrant remittances to enable farming, several villagers valued farming over off-farm work. Most migrants aim to save money over a particular period to buy agricultural machinery back home, invest in land or in education of children. One small farmer, with only one hectare with fruit trees, and who left each winter for work in Russia clearly stated, ‘if one wants to do it, one can do it. It is much [IH: i.e. it is tough], but, if people think, they can also work for themselves.’ The young farmer pointed to his head. ‘In my own opinion: If we use our own minds, we can also work ourselves on our lands. Instead of with them [the Chinese company] if we use our own power and knowledge’ (Interview, 13-7-12).

4.5 Ecological problems and locals' ideas about the Chinese 'projects'

Notably the Chinese company in Jaloliddini Rumi also had difficulties producing crops. The cotton and rice did not grow well, and the Chinese workers had to re-sow the cottonseeds three times. The *jamoat* leader had advised the Chinese workers to ask for support from Tajik agronomists, which they eventually did. Villagers told me somewhat disgraced that the Chinese had employed an Uzbek-speaking *Lakay*,³⁸ who lived isolated from other villagers (see also note 8). Some villagers laughed about the problems of the Chinese company: ‘they [the Chinese] wanted to work economically’; ‘we thought we could learn from the Chinese *dehqans*, now they cannot even grow crops themselves’ (Interview, 10-8-12). ‘I feel sorry for their situation’, a third one told me somewhat ironically (Interview, 19-7-12). Nevertheless the *jamoat* leader argued that the Chinese team would recover the fields and would cultivate the poor quality fields. Some villagers thought they used a lot of harmful chemical inputs, which were sorted at the *kolkhoz* office. Others believed the Chinese company had inputs to restore the salinised soils, but that they would work only for a few years. ‘But after they leave, no one knows how to do it, what to use’³⁹ (Interview, 10-7-12). One person working at the *jamoat* acknowledged the local anxiety:

‘Of course people are angry, (...) Why they are here? No one knows. They [the Chinese] sowed cotton four times, but it still does not grow well. Local farmers are bankrupt after a second sowing’.

Interview, 28-7-12

³⁷ As noted by Boboyorov (2011), local landed elites pursue different mechanisms to repress local disputes and quarrels over unequal distribution of resources. The powerful and capitalized people who appropriated most farm assets with decollectivisation force villagers to settle disputes locally and keep them secret, arguing that conflicts would damage village honour.

³⁸ See also note 8. In Chilsolagi, the *Lakay* lived isolated from other villagers and were clearly regarded as ‘others’; in that sense, it was also remarkable to notice how villagers reported on the *Lakay* agronomist who worked with the Chinese.

³⁹ Interestingly, in 2013 Chinese investors seem to have left already after one year in other parts of the country because they encountered water shortages (informal communication, 24-5-13).

Yet notably, production figures over 2013 signal that the Chinese company achieved remarkably high cotton yields in comparison with the yields produced by Tajik farmers (Asadov 2013). This contrasts with the situation I observed on the field.

4.6 Land as a liability and rural inhabitants' relation to the state

The lack of profits was an issue that triggered considerable frustrations among farmers. 'Yakum du nashidaistodaast', they taught me (Interview, 2-8-12); literally: 'one does not become two'. The tightly controlled cotton industry (see also note 14 and 15) makes that farmers hardly have a choice in selling their produce,⁴⁰ and the monopoly on cotton futurist companies in particular districts make that prices can be set (far) below world market prices (van Atta 2009, Government of Tajikistan 2007, Boboyorov 2012). In Jaloliddini Rumi, there is one primary cotton investment company, which contracts farmers and provides particular seed varieties and chemical fertilizers. According to several farmers, this company is in the hands of the deputy minister of agriculture (see note 25). Yet, although farmers are highly aware of the monopoly and the low prices paid for their cotton, the crop is regarded to have several advantages⁴¹ (see also van Atta 2009). Some farmers try to circumvent the official outlets, as one farmer in Jaloliddini Rumi told me about his challenge. District authorities severely hindered him and in the end he was left with cotton of lower quality.

The frictions and complaints of farmers in Jaloliddini Rumi about payments were related to the issue of the cotton debts. As described before, debts have evolved and increased over the years, and now sustain due to the worsened conditions of fields and water systems. Many fields in Jaloliddini Rumi have become indebted up to hundreds of dollars per hectare, a sum which farmers are expected to pay off once they take on farming. The Chinese company was exempted from paying taxes, but more importantly from paying debts, which added to villagers' grievances. 'If all lands were without debts, we could also take it' (Interview, 20-7-12). A number of farmers mentioned that debts of the Chinese fields were passed over to them, but they could not specify the details, which made me sometimes wonder if it was their perception rather than reality. Some farmers were puzzled as to how their debts could have increased up to these amounts in only a few years. They distrusted the authorities, whom they regarded as highly corrupt officials.

'In 2008 it was obsolutno nol [absolutely zero]. First they [the jamoat] had only bicycles to visit fields, now they have four cars'.

Interview, 29-7-12

Farmers have to pay a variety of taxes for use of the fields, also when soils are exhausted and of poor quality. I met with several farmers who could not achieve adequate yields and who had to negotiate their stance with the Land Committee, the district authorities (*hukumat*) and AgroProm.

As a Soviet department of agriculture, the district AgroProms were strongly embedded in the command economy, and in Jaloliddini Rumi the organisation is still an apparent actor in agriculture. Farmers are wary about the organisation and its staff, who regularly monitor farmers' practices and

⁴⁰ In Jaloliddini Rumi this was 'Ismoili Somoni Century XXI' (see also Government of Tajikistan 2007). In some cases farmers called this company 'H21'.

⁴¹ Cotton cultivation does have certain advantages in the continental climate, since the inadequate rural infrastructure and storage facilities constrains marketing of produce before it loses quality. For instance moisture impacts quality; if cotton stays outdoors too long after harvest, quality decreases rapidly. Furthermore, cotton stalks that remain after harvest of the seeds are an essential source of fuel for cooking and heating for rural households. If household members are not involved in work on the cotton fields, they either have to buy the expensive stalks or search on the fields for alternative sources of fuel, such as grasses.

the fields. In light of the indebted fields – about which I never heard farmers in Yavan speak of – the continuation of AgroProm in Jaloliddini Rumi might be a deliberate decision of the authorities.⁴²

Farmers expected a stronger and more active role of the government in recovering and maintaining rural infrastructure, but the government's visits remained empty promises. Most villagers did not trust the local authorities, and complaining was regarded as being futile.

'The raisi jamoat (...) he is only taking care of himself and does not look after Tajik dehqans. He is a Kulobi [IH: a person from Kulob district] and they all put it in their own pockets. They give the fields to Chinese dehqans, and we have to leave to Russia to earn money'.

Interview, 2-8-12

This refers back to the earlier described upheaval in governmental seats that followed the peace accord of the civil war. In Jaloliddini Rumi, instead of the *jamoat* leader, the former *kolkhoz rais* was always seen as the leader of the village, and with his death there was no one left who would listen to villagers' needs.

4.7 Direct local interactions between the Chinese people and Tajik villagers

Besides apparent complaints to the *jamoat* about the Chinese settlement in the *kolkhoz* office in Jaloliddini Rumi, and complaints about the Chinese people's habit to rinse clothes in the village canals, there was no direct grievance towards the Chinese. One day however, someone had stolen a bush of maize from the Chinese fields at night. According to villagers the Chinese people were furious and the local police were searching for the perpetrators (Interview, 30-7-12). A few days later the police had caught the people who stole the maize. They had to pay an extraordinarily high fine (*straf*) of 300 Somoni (over 60 US dollars) per maizecob, 'while not even a cow would eat it' [IH: i.e. of such a bad taste] (Interview, 30-7-12). The total sum would be over 3,000 Somoni. Villagers were somewhat amused by the theft, subjecting it a kind of ridicule, as they gossiped about it together on the street and during work. They stated that the Chinese translator had been 'generous' by lowering the fine, and that someone would have to protect the fields belonging to the Chinese company at night to prevent such theft.

Yet all in all, there were no outright conflicts between villagers and the Chinese people. And whereas conflicts over labour often figure prominently in the global land grab debate (cf. Li 2011), in both research sites there were no apparent clashes over employment. Labour relations on the ground were not altered with the arrival of the Chinese companies. In Jaloliddini Rumi, the Chinese team approached villagers themselves when they needed workers. In Yavan, the *mahalla* leader approached people, and for me it was difficult to observe whether patrimonialism or any other incentives played a role.⁴³ Many women did not want to work for the Chinese team because the team consisted of mainly men, and for some women, their husbands did not allow them to work for the Chinese. Yet, still, the Chinese company paid villagers a daily salary in cash, which was attractive to several people. Local farmers had complained about the high salaries paid by the Chinese. It created difficulties for them to find workers. Some villagers told me that the Chinese company had lowered the wages, but the contrast remained.

⁴² In an interview with USAID/Chemonics staff (advising the Tajik government on land reform with their grand Land Reform Project), my observation of the continuation of the Agroproms was contested (Interview, 15-8-12). According to my interviewees, AgroProms ceased operating long ago. They suggested that the organization I had witnessed was a private firm, which does not corroborate my findings and ideas.

⁴³ Boboyorov (2011) describes that *mahalla* leaders and religious authorities such as mullahs are primary local actors who secure labour for cotton farmers. Hence, an association is easily made here that the *mahalla* leader would be responsible to mobilize a labour force for the Chinese.

When I asked farmers if they benefited or learned from the Chinese farming practices, they often told me that they did not understand how the Chinese team worked and that local farmers did not have access to the Chinese techniques. On the other hand, some people showed respect for their work ethos and their achievements. Chinese labourers work under harsh conditions, regardless of the weather or dust or dirt.

Among Tajiks there are fears that a 'Chinese take over' is taking place. During a visit to a local NGO, one of the staff members said in an ironic way: 'in 50 years, Khatlon will be Chinese' (Interview, 2-8-12). This relates to and is part and parcel of the discourse among Tajik people about the Chinese people living and working in their country – meaning the Chinese presence in general, i.e. also outside of the rural area (see also Olimova 2009). The local perceptions I observed intersect with this general discourse; Chinese behaviour is surrounded with secrecy and mystery, people do not understand how they work and they cannot communicate with them. Repeatedly villagers made jokes about the Chinese people who were overseeing them during their work for the Chinese company, and they regularly expressed their amazement of Chinese habits. Chinese people eat pork meat, dogs and donkeys, and imported Chinese foods would make Tajik people ill. Goods of high quality brands 'made in China' are distrusted, and villagers made jokes about Chinese light bulbs that burst as soon as they are turned on.

5 Conclusion: global interactions and rural-state relations

'The articulations that result are not inevitable or predetermined; neither the local nor the global is totally subsumed by the other. But once the articulations are made, they affect all of the interconnected elements'.

Winslow 2007, 73

The objective of this paper was to illustrate the encounters and interactions that take place when the 'global' unfolds on the ground and meets the 'local', or better said: the foreign and the local. I have sought to show that rural responses to Chinese land deals in Tajikistan can best be explained by the socio-political and socio-economic environment in which the land deals are taking place.

Although villagers' grievances were sometimes made in the framework of the Chinese presence, they were in fact triggered by and focused their discontent on their everyday life, which existed already before the arrival of the Chinese company in 2012. The present Chinese land investments neither necessitated a dispossession of farmers from their land, nor have the land deals triggered further inequalities in people's access to land. In actuality the authorities, and the current uncertain policy and institutional structures hinder many rural dwellers to possess anything meaningful at all, and deprives them of their ability to start a farm. Agrarian reforms hitherto have not lead private farming to prosper, since the institutions required, are simply absent or inadequate.

Thus, the narrative of the Chinese investors and the responses of villagers towards them, actually displays the struggle of the Tajik farmer in the process of agrarian reform. The cases have highlighted that the current transitional context enables Chinese investors to obtain agricultural land, more important relatively good land, and this triggers particular perceptions of local farmers and villagers. It affects the way in which and to what extent, people consequently respond.

The strong ties between national and local *biznesmen*, landed classes of former *kolkhoz* directors and the state apparatus, and the blurred boundaries between them, create considerable power differentials. Farmers continuously have to cultivate relationships with local and district officials in order to continue farming, and without connections to people in powerful positions, farming seems a daily struggle. There is a high degree of uncertainty of formal legislation, which stresses the importance of loyalty and severely limits the ability to hold decision makers accountable.

Villagers' daily concerns were focused on the longer established structures rather than on the recent arrival of the Chinese people; frustrations and dissatisfaction with the conditions within which people ought to live and work. In both research sites, large inequalities in land already existed prior to the Chinese arrival. It was in particular in Yavan district where the accumulation of land by domestic *biznesmen* triggered anxiety.

In Jaloliddini Rumi, the issue of debts was the chief constraint for farmers and forms a daily source of frustration for individual farmers. The high debts hamper rural dwellers' ability to start a farm, and severely hinder existing farmers' ability to make profits or expand their farm enterprise. Additional issues of anxiety are the lack of meaningful state support and ability to obtain credits; the deteriorated or even absent rural infrastructure; and not the least the tight state control makes that there is only little room for innovation and modernisation in case farmers are able to do so.

Yet the way in which frictions were expressed were nuanced, at least, in Yavan. Particularly young men, those who were expected to become farmers, opt for an 'exit strategy' and migrate, rather than giving voice to their problems and avoid conflict by leaving. People fear re-emerging regional conflicts and the pressure to remain loyal to state officials is high. The state political realm remains at distance from villagers, and with the cessation of the *sovkhоз* and *kolkhoz*, rural dwellers do not see anyone able to represent them to voice concerns. Without the backing of powerful people or outsiders, one may understand that villagers are cautious in expressing their discontent.

Hence, the particularity of the Tajik context in which the Chinese land investments take place, take on specific interactions that signified local power differentials and relations to the means of production, specifically land. Encounters triggered expressions that taught me, and hopefully the reader too, about the more pressing issues currently characterizing farmers' everyday lives.

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A convergence of factors has been driving a revaluation of land by powerful economic and political actors. This is occurring across the world, but especially in the global South. As a result, we see unfolding worldwide a dramatic rise in the extent of cross-border, transnational corporation-driven and, in some cases, foreign government-driven, large-scale land deals. The phrase 'global land grab' has become a catch-all phrase to describe this explosion of (trans)national commercial land transactions revolving around the production and sale of food and biofuels, conservation and mining activities.

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Understanding forms of contention in the post-Soviet setting: rural responses to Chinese land investments in Tajikistan

The overwhelming attention to global 'land grabbing' has paid no heed to recent agricultural land investments in post-Soviet Central Asia. This paper contributes to fill the void and focuses on the rural politics in the context of China's rising presence in Tajikistan's agriculture. I take an actor-oriented inductive perspective to understand the politics of encounter in the context of Chinese agricultural land investments in rural Tajikistan. Global land investments take on different forms in different places, resulting from different investment motivations, local ecological conditions, but moreover from particular encounters on the ground. In this paper, I highlight the frictions that resulted from the dialogue and interaction between Tajik villagers and Chinese investors, which interestingly reveal first of all the relation of rural dwellers to the state. The struggle over land control in Tajikistan hitherto took place in an arena of domestic actors, but in the last years Chinese and Iranian land investors have entered the rural area. However, while grievances over the Chinese presence are observed, they are part of a broader struggle of current land reforms, and there is more fundamental discontent with the current socio-economic environment and land accumulation at large.



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