



# Working Paper 4

Opening up markets or fostering a new satellite state? Detangling the impetuses of Chinese land investments in Tajikistan

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## Abstract

New geopolitical dynamics and the surge for natural resources, such as land, accompany the rise of the BRICS countries in the global arena. In this paper, I discuss the case of Chinese agricultural land investments in the Central Asian state, Tajikistan. Emerging from a Soviet past, Tajikistan seems to be on its way to becoming one of China's newest satellite states. During the last five years, Chinese involvement in Tajikistan has become more and more diversified, including in land and agriculture, which points to the multifaceted drivers behind China's presence in the neighbouring Tajik republic. I thus use Tajikistan to explore the nature and drivers of Chinese land acquisitions in Central Asia, a region normally ignored in the debate on global agricultural land investments. Such an exercise is expected to raise more broadly applicable insights into how various, and often competing, drivers are contributing to China's foreign land rush.

**Keywords:** Tajikistan; China; land investments; agriculture; Chinese companies

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## 1 Introduction

China's influence in its neighbouring Central Asian states is growing at a fast pace. Among the latest and less common manifestations of this influence are Chinese land investments in Tajikistan. Importantly, while a significant number of analyses appeared in the past five years on Chinese agricultural projects in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America, China's engagement in agriculture in its close vicinity has been discussed much less<sup>1</sup> (see also Breslin 2009, Henderson *et al.* 2013, Yahuda 2010, Visser and Spoor 2011, Visser *et al.* 2012 for reports on Chinese investments in Russia's Far East/Siberia).

In this paper, I shed light on China's emergent position in the Central Asian region, as one of the BRICS whose activities in global land deals are closely followed. Through a description of different kinds of Chinese involvement in Tajikistan's agriculture, I aim to describe the nature of China's farming activities in Tajikistan, and to explicate that these different forms represent different bilateral or cross-border interactions, signifying the major ways in which Chinese actors currently engage with land globally. In doing so, I intend to contribute to filling the gap in understanding China's role in foreign land investments, building upon field research I conducted in Tajikistan (2012-2015), in China (2014), and supplemented with archive and media/web research conducted between 2012 and 2014.

The nature of different Chinese investments in Tajikistan exemplifies that there are multiple drivers behind China's involvement in land in its immediate 'neighbourhood'. In what follows, I aim to explain (firstly) that this border region has particular significance for Chinese domestic issues<sup>2</sup>; but at the same time, I (secondly) aim to show that individual Chinese endeavours are clearly led by commercial aims (a container concept commonly used to explain Western, and sometimes Chinese, land investments); whereas (thirdly), the investments in areas with low-lying productive land, could point at entirely different impetuses for these land investments.

While it is often assumed that the pursuit of food or energy security drive China's global surge for land, this argument does not sufficiently explain China's activities in Tajikistan. The case of Tajikistan, and Central Asia more broadly, offers an interesting case to investigate various, and alternative, less discussed drivers behind China's land investment rush – not just in abstract, broad terms, but by investigating them more closely. Examples include the 'export' of surplus rural labour, border region stability, and long-term geo-political/international cooperation, among others.

After this introduction, the next section continues with describing China's engagement in the Central Asian region and Tajikistan, which border the People's Republic of China (PRC) along the western frontier. This description is partially chronological, tracing the developments of Chinese projects and presence in the neighbouring region, particularly since the year 2000. In the third section, I discuss and detail the drivers of Chinese presence in the region, including in the agriculture sphere. The fourth section thereafter, describes different types of Chinese involvement in Tajik agriculture, which include Chinese individual farm projects, as well as a larger investment by a Chinese company that operates in different districts in southwest Tajikistan. This latter part will highlight the variety of drivers of Chinese land investments. The last section concludes by wrapping up and summarising observations and findings discussed earlier.

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<sup>1</sup> This not only refers to China's global land investments, but also to discourses 'emphasizing the appeal of China as an alternative tend to focus on developing states in Latin America and, most often, Africa (Breslin 2009, 831).

<sup>2</sup> 'The Soviet Union was a key political and economic partner of Xinjiang in the 1930s and 1940s, before the founding of the People's Republic of China' (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 3). (...) In the 50s and 60s already many people from Xinjiang migrated to the bordering Soviet republics. (*ibid.*)

## 2 China's going global and engagement with Central Asia

### 2.1 Characterising China's rise in Central Asia

The opening up of Central Asia after the Soviet collapse provided corporate and state actors with possibilities to extend and enlarge their activities and influence in the region. Not least, China's regional rise benefited significantly from the opportunity to access the resource frontiers in its western neighbours.

Since the late 1990s, Chinese projects in the former Soviet border zone, including Central Asia and Russia's Far East, started to develop. In 1996, the Shanghai Group was established, consisting of the three Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as Russia and China. The Shanghai Group – The Shanghai Five, was joined by Uzbekistan in 2001, and transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The SCO has become one of the key building blocks of China's expansion into Central Asia (see also Yahuda 2010, 192, Li Czin 2013, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Kassenova 2009). The main focus of the SCO hitherto has been on security cooperation and combating terrorism and separatism, but its actual results in the sphere of security remain disputable to date (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 28-31). The agreements that have taken form during SCO summits are predominantly bilateral (interview with Mr. Kholiknazarov, director of the Centre for Strategic Research under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 18 February 2015). The SCO has two important economic aspects for China: 1) opportunity of development of the Far West, and 2) conquest of new markets (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 34). These two aspects play critical roles in China's regional rise, which I discuss in the third section.

China's presence in the region is most often associated with high investments and large construction projects. The main sectors in which Chinese companies are active in Central Asia are infrastructure, energy (oil, gas extraction), and in recent years, also in agriculture. According to Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012, 47), up until 2012, there were relatively few medium-sized Chinese enterprises in Central Asia, particularly in comparison with the number of Chinese businesses in Southeast Asia. Based on my own observations in Tajikistan (winter 2014-2015), many new businesses have emerged there, ranging from individual petty trade to large state companies, and including a significant number of medium-sized private companies.

Until today, China's state-owned companies are assumed to head most of China's overseas projects, particularly when it comes to their impact in economic, social and geopolitical and transformation (see Henderson *et al.* 2013, 1242, Hofman and Ho 2012). Yet, Chinese overseas activities include both state-led 'going out', as well as individual, private economic activities (fieldwork 2014/2015, Yahuda 2010, Olimova 2008, Sodiqov 2009, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Alff 2014, Jarosiewicz and Strachota 2013). While national media zooms in primarily on the bilateral (i.e. state-state) initiatives, the Chinese presence is in fact much more pluralistic, and also comprises of small-scale enterprises run by Chinese individuals.

China's regional rise seems to transform, from initially predominantly state-guided projects to less-guided, more dynamic developments. This has been documented in other regions too, where less state-guided, more private initiatives followed earlier state-backed investments (see also Henderson *et al.* 2013, Frost and Ho 2005, writing on Chinese companies in Southeast Asia). Along these lines of reasoning, one could state that China's rise in the Central Asian region is in a particular phase along a development path, in which the kinds of Chinese actors and businesses are transforming over time (see Gu 2009, Tan-Mullins *et al.* 2010, Yan and Sautman 2010, writing on Chinese actors in Africa). Chatelard (in a personal communication in November 2014) and Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012, 189) also observed other parallels between Chinese businesses in Central Asia and Africa. Like in Africa, the Chinese state was a latecomer, but has rapidly gained prominent footing there now, as a generous creditor of host states' budgets. At the same time, Chinese companies have obtained prominent roles in infrastructure construction, and acquired prominent positions in local markets where they sell cheap goods that are affordable for local people (see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 189).

There are two other related observable trends in China's investments and overseas projects. One

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remarkable trend is the ‘sectoral split’ in Chinese actors’ businesses (Henderson *et al.* 2013, 1230). Individual, small and medium size companies engage primarily in petty trade and smaller manufacturing with a clear commercial orientation. The larger projects in infrastructure and extractive industries are undertaken by the bigger companies, which are tied to Chinese provincial or national authorities<sup>3</sup>. This ‘split’ may disappear in the future, driven by more private involvement in the monopolised economic sectors of previously emerging economies. As such, it may create apparent competition between private corporate investment and state-controlled enterprises. The second interesting trend is the strong, regional clustering of Chinese actors – meaning that several Chinese individuals and companies come from the same region (Henan for instance<sup>4</sup>), but also that they eventually settle in clusters. For instance, in Tajikistan, one can observe a concentration of Chinese investors in particular districts. A large number of projects originate from Henan province, and there is a clear clustering of Chinese projects in one of the districts surrounding the Tajik capital. This is the case for instance in Yovon district, where Chinese companies have built a cement factory, constructed a railway, a power plant, and lease farmland. A logical explanation for the concentration of settlements could be that investments go hand in hand with elite connections, which have their stakes in particular locations.

## **2.2 China in Tajikistan**

China’s presence in Tajikistan has been more pronounced since the second half of the 2000s onwards (interview 18 February 2015, Olimova 2008, Ibraimov 2009, 48; Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012), and the importance of Chinese capital injections for Central Asian economies is growing rapidly now that the former Soviet republics are facing severe decreases in remittance-flows from Russia (see also Farchy 2014, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 115, Junguriat 2012). The growth in Chinese projects in Tajikistan evolved more slowly and remains small in comparison with Chinese involvement in other Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, in Tajik terms, and relative to other foreign donors, China’s role for economic development is significant – outcompeting other countries in terms of loans and infrastructure development<sup>5</sup> (see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, ICG 2013, Sodikov 2009, Jarosiewicz and Strachota 2013).

China has become Tajikistan’s second most important ally (after Russia) – in terms of state credits, loans and investments – and the Tajik establishment has turned towards China, rather than Iran, Russia, or Europe (fieldwork 2015). The director of the Centre for Strategic Research under Tajikistan’s President Kholiknazarov does not shy away from expressing good neighbourhood relations. China is the most wanted non-conditional creditor in today’s Tajikistan (interview 18 February 2015). China announced an investment of USD 2 billion in 2014, to be invested mainly in infrastructure and energy in Tajikistan. For 2015-2018, an investment package totalling USD 6 billion has been announced<sup>6</sup> (interview 12 February 2015, see also Farchy 2014a).

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<sup>3</sup> In Africa this is not necessarily the case (personal communication Chatelard, 21 November 2014), where larger Chinese private companies have become involved in major projects, like infrastructure and energy production.

<sup>4</sup> Henan province, as stated in Chinese media, is currently facilitating the establishment of 17 agricultural companies overseas, covering 11 countries over the five continents (Xinhuanet 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) accounted for almost 50 per cent of all FDI in the Tajik economy in 2013. The numbers of the first half of 2014 indicate a similar trend, in which China by far is the largest investor in the country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the RT Tajikistan, 2014) retrieved from <http://mfa.tj/en/investment-climate/investment-climate-in-tajikistan.html> on 13 October 2014.

<sup>6</sup> The planned investment is equivalent to two-thirds of Tajikistan’s 2013 gross domestic product and more than 40 times its annual foreign direct investment (Farchy 2014a).

The amount of sovereign debt Tajikistan owes to China increased up to USD 200 million. While this is a fair amount by Chinese standards, in Tajik terms this sum is much more substantial, especially when taking into account the interest rate attached. Instead of writing it off, the Chinese government takes a more pragmatic approach. It allows the Tajik government to gradually pay it off, while the Tajik economy is opened up for inflow of Chinese goods and businesses. This suggests that access to future resource extraction plays a role in Chinese loans and investments<sup>7</sup>.

Equally as important as state-driven initiatives, is the fact that many Chinese individuals have crossed the border in the last few years<sup>8</sup>, after having heard and noticed the lucrative nature of doing business in the frontier zone of Central Asia. While such small-scale activities often do not catch the eye, Chinese individuals have in fact been the most active agents of entrepreneurship in China's growth abroad (see also Wang 2007 and Gu 2009, writing on Chinese private companies in Africa). Since China's 'opening up' in the early 1980s, and 'going global' in the mid 2000s, people have actively responded to new market opportunities, either at home, in the direct vicinity, or further away. This also applies to Chinese individuals in present-day Central Asia<sup>9</sup>, Russia's Far East, and Mongolia (see also Dyatlov 2012).

Tajikistan has experienced increasing cross border interaction and investment, pursued by individuals and families who seek to build up a better life there (fieldwork 2014/2015). Some have started businesses in the trading of goods, yet others have used their experiences from back home to start privately-run farming businesses (interview 6/7-11 2014). Over time, the number of Chinese workers in Tajik society has fluctuated, clearly shaped by and depending on economic sector development<sup>10</sup>. According to some analysts there are around 10 to 15,000 registered Chinese migrants in Tajikistan (interview 13 February 2015, see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 129), while this number might reach 50,000 when informal migration is included (interview 13 February 2015). More exact numbers of Chinese migrants are difficult to find. The majority of Chinese migrants are only seasonally employed by Chinese companies and float between China and Tajikistan over the year (fieldwork observations 2014). There are no Tajik or Chinese agencies which keep reliable statistics in this regard – and there are no figures made public about the number of Chinese people entering the country, as migration of Chinese is a very sensitive issue in Tajikistan (interview on 13 February 2015 with Muzaffar Olimov from the Tajik think tank Sharq; see also Dyatlov 2012, on the discourse of Chinese migrants in Russia and the difficulties in making proper numeric assessments).

The growing number of Chinese migrant workers and businesses has aroused increasing fears and suspicions among the Tajik population, but one notices that the discourse is in transformation (fieldwork 2015, Pannier 2011, Vinson 2012, Tursunzoda 2013). The fear among Tajik citizens for China's expansion into the country reached a climax in 2011 when a longstanding border dispute was settled between China and

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<sup>7</sup> More long-term projects have been implemented in the past few years. One example is the joint-venture of the China National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Corporation (CNODC) with Total (from France) and a Tajik counterpart that was established in 2013, to explore oil and gas reserves in Tajikistan's south-western region Khatlon (interview 9 September 2014, see also Farchy 2014a). Meanwhile, Tajikistan has become a transit country for the gas pipeline constructed from Turkmenistan to China, from which Tajikistan apparently does not benefit.

<sup>8</sup> Entrance to Tajikistan from China is possible only over the border post at Kulma-Kalasu (see also Alimov 2012). It was opened in 2004, and has increased in importance as a corridor for China's regional growth. Only since 2010 has the border been open year-round.

<sup>9</sup> According to Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012), informal interactions in the China-Central Asia border zone are increasingly replaced by more formally institutionalized trade patterns (see also Alff 2014). I doubt, however, whether this argument is still valid today, primarily since there has been significant growth in cross-border entrepreneurship (from both sides) during the last few years.

<sup>10</sup> Relative increase and decrease of Chinese personnel fluctuates with economic dynamics. In 2014, the number of temporary workers decreased due to an increase in prices of construction material, which makes profits and turnover of Chinese enterprises in Tajikistan lower, with consequently less work to offer Chinese people.

Tajikistan<sup>11</sup>. This border dispute originated under Soviet rule, and China's claim of Tajik land was coupled with claims of Kazakh and Kyrgyz territory (CentrAsia 2004, see also Yahuda 2010, 191, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Tursunzoda 2013). The concession of land by the Tajik government to China in the eastern autonomous region, Gorno Badakhshon, comprised an area of 100,000 square kilometres – meaning one per cent of Tajikistan's total land area (Olimova 2008, 64, Alimov 2012, 53-64, see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). Tajik people feared that the Tajik government would handover more land in the future, which added to the speculations of China's growing presence in the country. Wariness over Chinese take-overs, colonization and 'Chinafication' still frequently circulate in the media (see for instance SSSR 2009, Ilhom 2012, Asia Plus 2014b, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 108, CentrAsia 2004, ICG 2013, Jarosiewicz and Strachota 2013). This leads me into the following section, in which I discuss the possible drivers of China in Tajikistan.

### 3 China's interests in Eurasia: regional stability and market interests

The debate on China's role in Central Asia features two interrelated aspects that parallel the debate on China's global rise: first, the supposed state-backing of companies, and second, the difficulty in getting a grip on the structure and motivation of Chinese companies going global. In the following sections, I focus particularly on the later aspect of possible motives for China's presence in Tajikistan. The issue of state backing resurfaces throughout the text, and I touch on this issue with particular reference to the Chinese land investments in a later section.

#### 3.1 Regional and social stability

The role of Chinese actors in the Central Asian region cannot be understood well without placing it in the wider geographic and socio-political environment of the border zone. Regional and border stability are prime aspects for the Chinese government. These aspects also feature bilateral meetings, and are cornerstones of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Securing regional stability is a prominent driver of China's presence in the region, which includes the Chinese autonomous Xinjiang region, Afghanistan and Pakistan. All are earmarked as sources of social and political instability, which demand the Chinese government plays an active role in its own backyard.

The Chinese government has to balance two major issues, which can be termed 'good neighbourhood policy' (*mulin zhengce*)<sup>12</sup>, and 'hard power' – the latter referring to the issue of controlling the Uyghur population in Xinjiang (Breslin 2009, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 199). Stability – including the border – is the bottom line of China's rulers. 'If China fails to stay stable, the Chinese people cannot stay happy. This will be a major disaster for the world', Vice-Minister Ai Ping stated in a meeting with a European delegation (July 2014).

The 'far west development', mentioned above in relation to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), plays an important role in China's presence in Central Asia, particularly when it comes to controlling ethnic minorities and guiding migrant mobility. For Chinese individuals, the autonomous region Xinjiang is the principal corridor towards the west. The Xinjiang region is changing rapidly, mainly resulting from

<sup>11</sup> As Olimova (2008, 64) describes, 'China claimed three disputed sites in Gorno Badakhshan (...) totalling to an area of over 20,000 square kilometers. In 2001, after a long period of coordination, Tajikistan agreed to transfer more than 1,000 square kilometers of this territory to China. In June 2006, work began on border demarcation; it continued until the end of 2008.' By 2013, the border has shifted. While there were no settlements in the disputed area, Tajik herders have lost their pastures (Olimova 2008, 64, Alimov 2012).

<sup>12</sup> This is often 'referred to in China as a 'peripheral policy'—a policy towards China's peripheral areas or *zhoubian zhengce*' (Breslin 2009, 819).

China's open door policy and the far west development program. Part of Chinese migrants' presence in Tajikistan stemmed from people's earlier settlement in China's Xinjiang region (interviews November 2014), about which Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012, 183) wrote: 'Xinjiang systematically cast as the key example of the Chinese quest for a new *Lebensraum*, as the settlement of millions of Han constitutes the third phase of the 'Far West development program'.

For the Chinese state, economic development and continuing economic growth and welfare for the Chinese people are also critical in safeguarding social stability, particularly in the border region. Logically, China's rise in the Eurasian region is also given in by the need to further economic expansion, in which the 'revival' of the historical Silk Road plays a very important role, which I describe in the following section.

### 3.2 The Silk Road Economic Belt

In 2013, Xi Jinping launched the plan to rejuvenate the grand Silk Road, the historical trade corridor connecting East Asian dynasties with major economies in the west. The impetus given to rehabilitate the old trade route has been driven by the wish to facilitate trade for economies both in the East and West, but should also facilitate China's rise in border economies and those further away. Importantly, the Silk Road was historically also a corridor that allowed for cultural exchanges and knowledge transfer.

The objective to rehabilitate the corridor cannot be understood without first understanding the on-going competition between states to gain and hold their ground in the Central Asian region. In 2011, Hillary Clinton visited the Central Asian region and sought to give new impetus to the Silk Road under the name of the 'New Silk Road Initiative'<sup>13</sup>. The launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt by Xi Jinping in 2013 can thus be read as an act striving to (re)capture and control the plan, along with regional economic growth.

The renewed attention of both the United States and China must also be placed in the context of Russia's continuing efforts to stay present in the region. In 2012, Russia established the Eurasian Customs union, which includes (anno 2015) Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Customs union facilitates trade between the involved economies, while also imposing obstacles for non-aligned countries. For the Chinese state, which has major investments in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the customs union, particularly since Kyrgyzstan's recent accession, creates obstacles for goods entering into Central Asia. The customs union guarantees the Russian state a stake in economic developments in its former periphery.

Rather than any other state, like the United States or Russia, the Chinese government has been actively building corridors and inroads into Eurasia since 2013, with the aim to open new markets nearby, but also to facilitate trade and business further away. The Third Plenum of the 18th Party Congress, held on November 12, 2013, also contained explicit goals to drive Chinese investment overseas.

With significant investment in infrastructure and trade (including policies, bureaucratic simplifications), the roads towards the west are opening up, providing improved access to energy resources and to emerging markets in the western neighbourhood and further away (see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Rickleton 2014, Jarosiewicz and Strachota 2013). The investments involved are significant, with new investments, loans and credits being augmented yearly, and Xi Jinping announced considerable investments in the Central Asian economies of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Xi Jinping has announced the establishment of a USD 40 billion fund to develop infrastructure in the border region (see also Rickleton 2014).

Efforts to develop the Silk Road Economic Belt are undertaken by the Chinese national government as

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<sup>13</sup> As Clinton stated: 'Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan's and India's growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into Indian linens. Furniture and fruit from Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond' (quoted in Kucera 2011).

well as by lower level, provincial authorities<sup>14</sup> (see also Xinhuanet 2014, Yuldoshev 2014b, Pan Zhiping 2014). China's preferential loans and investments in the region, as well as elsewhere throughout the world (see Wang 2007 and Alden and Hughes 2009, writing on Chinese investments in Africa, and Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 52, writing on Chinese loans in Central Asia) facilitate the global expansion of Chinese companies. Chinese grants, loans, or aid packages provided by Chinese banks (such as the Chinese ExIm Bank and the Chinese Development Bank), are regularly transferred in kind. By granting loans on the condition that this Chinese company executes a particular project – agricultural research and production, infrastructure construction – the sum granted is actually returning to the Chinese economy<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, by controlling the finances, the Chinese donor controls final expenditures to avoid corruption. Hence, the loans are primarily usurped by Chinese businesses, and the facilities provided for by bilateral agreements between provincial authorities and the Tajik national authorities literally open doors, which Hofman and Ho (2012) previously called 'developmental outsourcing'<sup>16</sup>. Commerce undertaken by Chinese companies is driven in tandem with Chinese authorities' efforts to gain presence and power.

The Silk Road Economic Belt has all to do with China's desire to continue its economic growth, beyond its need to address 'resource hunger'. This relates to domestic competition, to state finance, and to labour issues, which I deal with shortly hereafter. China's development toward a more market-based economy pushed a process of privatisation of Chinese state-owned enterprises and led to a drastic state withdrawal in several sectors of the economy (the famous 'grasping the large, and letting go of the small'). It forced centrally planned enterprises to dismantle and reconfigure in a competitive market (see also Yan and Sautman 2010, 315, on Chinese State Owned agricultural companies in Africa). Especially for those enterprises, which were unable to face the fierce domestic competition, the opening up of borders provided an opportunity to stay in business (see also Naughton 2007). They could seek their fortune abroad. This unfolded in different migration and trade patterns overseas. Families, or entire companies, moved abroad to make a new start, sometimes oriented to an entirely different market segment<sup>17</sup>. In some instances, a company could receive a small amount of start-up capital from the Chinese government.

As a consequence of the wide array of investments, trade and migration patterns by Chinese actors, it is very difficult to estimate the role of the impetus given to the Silk Road Economic Belt in particular aspects of China's regional rise. The concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt is complicated by the fact that it remains very vague in terms of concrete goals, plans, and visions, as was clearly stated by policy experts in Tajikistan (interview 18 February 2015, see also Brown 2014). In official discourse in particular, the Silk Road Economic Belt is prominent (interviews China July 2014), which does not only include tangible development of infrastructure and corridors, but also includes transfer and expansion of ideas and ideologies, as analysts have stated (see for instance Ma Junjie 2015). Also interesting in this regard is the large amount of scholarships recently provided to Central Asian students to study in China. In early 2015, it was remarkable to see in how many young Tajik people in and around Dushanbe nowadays speak (some) Chinese. The decision to learn Chinese could be read as a pragmatic decision of Tajik parents to secure employment

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<sup>14</sup> 'As soon as the concept of a Silk Road Economic Belt was put forward, the Chinese provinces and cities along the ancient Silk Road responded proactively and put forward their proposals and suggestions on how to forge a modern Silk Road' (Pan Zhiping 2014).

<sup>15</sup> With money returning to the Chinese economy, money can be re-invested or consumed domestically, which is one of the priority areas of the Chinese government, as also stated in the Third Plenum of November 2013.

<sup>16</sup> According to Henderson *et al.* (2013, 1229): 'the companies that constitute the cutting edge of China's economic externalization are wholly or partially owned by the central government or by provincial or municipal governments.'

<sup>17</sup> An interesting example – outside of the agrarian sphere – is a Chinese steel factory in Tajikistan. The company uses methods and techniques, which have been forbidden in China for reasons of environmental and labour safety; the conditions are highly polluting and the working conditions are harsh and unsafe (fieldwork September 2014).

for their children in the future, but at the same time it could be regarded as a longer-term vision of the Chinese government to develop infrastructure in both economic and human capital terms (interview 13 February 2015, fieldwork 2015).

The above clarifies that there is an inter-relationship between governmental goals, incentives, and profit-oriented companies. What remains complicated, is grasping the exact drive and background of Chinese agricultural land investments (as remarked by many researchers on China, see for instance Henderson *et al.* 2013, Hofman and Ho 2012). As Henderson *et al.* (2013, 1228) state, 'In developing an adequate understanding of Chinese capitalism we clearly need to take cognisance of the multiplicity of corporate forms in contemporary China'. This leads me to the next paragraph, in which I discuss the different drivers of Chinese land investments in Central Asia.

### 3.3 Theorising China's drivers of land investments in Central Asia

China's going global plan in regard to land is often explained by a number of different drivers: first, the issue of neo-colonialism and manifestations of a Chinese imperialism, second, the increasing resource hunger of the Chinese state and economy, and third, the Chinese pursuit of opening up its markets and profit-orientation. What is most often unacknowledged is a fourth issue: the fact that issues of labour surplus play a role in China's overseas investments, with regard to which I point particularly at self-initiated cross border activities. In what follows, I describe these different drivers from a Chinese background, and how these fit into the context of Chinese investments in Tajikistan.

#### 3.3.1 China's strive for hegemony

China's surge for land is often described as neo-colonialism, driven by geopolitical interests to establish and secure worldwide hegemonic power, a need to counteract 'western' hegemony, and to secure future access to resources (for a critique see Hofman and Ho 2012, Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, Yan and Sautman 2010). As explained earlier, the grand Silk Road project is driven both by geopolitical as well as economic reasons, which may also touch on Chinese investments in Tajikistan. The natural resources produced by the Central Asian states, along with the social and political instability in the region, triggers other nation states to seek influence in these countries. There is longstanding competition in Central Asia among nation states like the United States, Russia and China, to (re)gain a strong foothold in the Central Asian region, as mentioned in a preceding paragraph.

#### 3.3.2 China's quest for food

In relation to the 'quest for resources', a *second* driver that helps explain Chinese investments in extractive industries, the wave of agricultural investments that have been implemented all over the world since 2008, have often been explained by the drive to secure food supplies for the Chinese population<sup>18</sup> (see for instance Grain 2008, for a critique see Hofman and Ho 2012, Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, Gong and le Billon 2014). I would argue, that this assumption should be challenged more often, by raising the question whether and to what extent China's domestic food security concerns really do drive investments. For instance, investments purposing cultivation of non-perishable crops, like soy in Latin American countries, may indeed be led by

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<sup>18</sup> Chinese investments in African countries purposing cultivation of food crops in food insecure countries, have been subject to widespread media attention and critique, as being pursued for Chinese domestic interests, while further depriving local people's access to food (for a discussion see Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, Hofman and Ho 2012, Bräutigam and Tang 2009).

domestic needs, but in other settings, investments in the production of unpreserved vegetables and fruits are of a totally different kind. The transaction costs for shipping of unpreserved vegetables and fruits are substantial, which implies that shipping produce back to China is not worth it. This equally applies, maybe even more so, to perishable goods produced in Tajikistan, where the impoverished infrastructure and highly mountainous geography severely hinder the transportation and trade of food between landlocked Tajikistan and China. Besides the poor condition of the infrastructure, which forms significant obstacles, the bureaucracy and transaction costs are considerable for export of goods into China. Time required for trucks and lorries from Dushanbe to cross into China is three days, but if they carry goods from Tajikistan, the bureaucratic process takes almost a month, not including the cumbersome border issues, bribes, and informal taxation that also must be considered (fieldwork observations 2014, interviews September 2014 and January 2015, see also Bohr 2004). The issue of transporting goods back to China is disputable since the Chinese government is wary of the opium trade (Tajikistan is a transit country for opium produced in Afghanistan). Therefore Chinese authorities highly restrict shipping of goods from Central Asia to China through the Pamir Mountains.

Thus, refuting frequent speculations, investments in Tajikistan do not intend to supply the Chinese market. China's domestic food security is not at play here, which is something that has also been confirmed by the Chinese workers in the Tajik field (interviews with Chinese farm workers 5-6 January 2015, see also Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, 1690 on China in Africa, Yan and Sautman 2010, 315).

### 3.3.3 China's search for markets

A *third* driver could be singled out that plays a pronounced role in the context of China in Tajikistan: Chinese investments in Tajikistan are driven by the pursuit to open up and develop new markets, which are envisioned in the revitalisation of the Silk Road. The Tajik autonomous region Gorno Badakhshon has become one of the primary entrances of Chinese transport to Central Asia in the past decade (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Sodiqov 2009, Ibraimov 2009, 49). As Bräutigam and Zhang (2013, 1690) state in regard to Chinese investments in Africa: (...) 'the details of these stories suggest that the way they have been interpreted needs to be revised. In particular, these investments do not appear to be part of a coordinated Chinese strategy to secure land in Africa to grow food for China. Rather, they reflect the uncoordinated strategies of a number of different firms to explore commercial investment opportunities across multiple sectors.' The fact that the Chinese *agricultural* investments in Tajikistan have been established only recently – three or four years later than most other larger Chinese projects in construction and infrastructure – suggests that the agricultural investments might be driven by the need to cater to Chinese migrants' food preferences (fieldwork observations 2014). I will come back to this in a later section. Less known is the fact that the first individual undertakings took place several years before the bilateral agreements between Tajikistan and China were negotiated and agreed upon.

### 3.3.4 China's need for jobs

This brings me to a *fourth* driver: labour problems and surplus labour. Chinese cross border movements are vehicles for solving domestic problems, also in economic and social terms: channelling surpluses of companies, industries, and of jobless people. As Laruelle and Peyrouse (2012, 63) remarked: 'continental trade is not merely commercial in its vocation; it implies strategies of economic and social development whose primary objective is not profitability. Making local trade flows dynamic can help to solve social problems by alleviating poverty and providing work to landlocked populations.' This corresponds with the apparent drive and incentives provided by Henan province for instance, to establish agricultural businesses abroad (see also Xinhuanet 2014). In a related way, some have argued that the agricultural investments in

Africa function as a way to channel labour surplus from China's poor rural areas abroad<sup>19</sup> (fieldwork observations 2014; see Bräutigam and Tang 2009, 964, for an African context). At the same time, one could interpret individually initiated overseas entrepreneurship in the cross border zone as a search for prosperity and overcoming unemployment at home (exemplified further below by the example of a Chinese family that is farming in Tajikistan). Also in other countries and regions bordering China, such as Siberia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, one can observe these particular motives driving settlements across the borders (see also Alff 2014 who describes earlier Kazakh-Chinese cross border settlement, see also Dyatlov 2012).

I show further below that geopolitical, as well as commercial, and domestic stability motives, play a role in understanding Chinese investments in Tajikistan, perhaps even for state enterprises under strong guidance of a Chinese government, which pursues a geo-political agenda of regional social stability instead of expansion of (short-term) commercial business. Chinese foreign policy, investment, cross-border trade, migration and investments, certainly in the direct border zone, reflect the domestic issues at stake (see also Breslin 2009, 820). In the following section, I build upon these drivers discussed in the above. I describe and analyse the different kinds of Chinese actors engaged in Tajikistan's agricultural sector, which exemplify the drivers behind Chinese presence in Tajikistan.

## 4 Different kinds of Chinese agricultural engagements in Tajikistan

In this section, I describe the different types of Chinese actors involved in agricultural production in Tajikistan. In doing so, this sheds light on the various motives that drive Chinese involvement in Tajik agriculture. Additionally, the examples in this section provide insight into the forms and approaches that accompany these particular kinds of engagement.

Since 2012, Chinese companies have become involved in the agricultural sector of Tajikistan. This has been a sensitive issue ever since domestic and international media started to pay attention to land investments. Land ownership remains a 'political hot potato' in the Central Asian region. The actual implementation of the Chinese *agricultural* investment in Tajikistan is remarkable, since earlier announced and planned *agricultural* investments in Kyrgyzstan (2004) and Kazakhstan (2009) have been cancelled<sup>20</sup> (CentrAsia 2004, Demytrie 2010, Visser and Spoor 2011, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 108, 110). Opposition and protest in Tajikistan has been absent, which might explain why investments have in fact materialized, in contrast to Chinese investments announced in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (see also Trilling 2013, on civic protest in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan regarding foreign investment in mining).

### 4.1 Chinese individual farm projects in Tajikistan: cross border entrepreneurship

Over the course of my periodic stays in Tajikistan (2012-2015), I have come across different Chinese individual farms, ranging from one to almost 100 hectares. These individual Chinese farms are managed by

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<sup>19</sup> 'Chinese observers for instance have stated that agricultural investment in Africa also has the potential to relocate Chinese farmers displaced through the dual pressures of WTO trade liberalization and China's rapid urbanization' (Bräutigam and Tang 2009, 694).

<sup>20</sup> In Kyrgyz media Chinese colonization and rumours about large Chinese leaseholds circulated, which thereafter have never been confirmed (CentrAsia 2004). The framing of the supposed deal hinted at discrediting the president of that time. A region in Xinjiang acquired rights to lease 7,000 ha. in Kazakhstan, in one of the border districts: 'the lands were rented to about 3,000 Chinese colonists for a period of ten years' (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, 108). Again in 2009, rumours circulated about a supposed deal between Chinese and Kazakh authorities for the leasehold of 1,000,000 hectares of land. This time the announcement caused major protest, after which the agreement was not finalized (ibid, see also Visser and Spoor 2011, Demytrie 2010, on the Chinese investment in Kazakhstan in 2004 see Altaiskaia Pravda 2004).

one to a few people and engage in small-scale commercial sales at local bazaars. Their farming practices and types of land tenure arrangements differ, but these farmers can be categorised in the following way. First of all, there are Chinese individuals who grow vegetables for their personal use, or to supplement their income from their formal occupations in various Chinese companies (interview 2 November 2014). In most instances they work individually, otherwise they cooperate within their close network. The Chinese primarily use their labour power, techniques and inputs (fieldwork 2012 and 2013; interview 2 November 2014). The scale remains rather small, and the crops grown are for cooking Chinese dishes, such typical Chinese vegetables, garlic, Chinese pumpkin, cabbage and beans.

These particular small Chinese farming endeavours are self-organised. The migrants lease land for sometimes only one growing season, and seek to use fields in the direct vicinity of their accommodation.<sup>21</sup> The people employing these activities sometimes have a rural background, but not necessarily. The demographic structure of Chinese society plays a role here. The Chinese economy has featured a transition in the past twenty years, which has been marked by rapid urbanisation and outmigration of the rural area. Most people who currently work in the urban (i.e. industrial sectors) have a rural background, and are used to cultivating their household plots intensively (it is also a post-Soviet practice to have and cultivate a household plot, see Visser 2009). While these people changed their occupations due to migration, they rely on their roots and use their farm experiences to supplement their formal income once abroad (interviews 8 November 2014, 12 November 2014, 26 October 2014).

The second type of Chinese small-scale farm is of a more established, permanent, commercial kind. It differs from the first in that its primary goal is capital accumulation, rather than being a non-remunerating subsistence activity. One example is a farm run by a Chinese household. The family, originating from the eastern part of China, moved initially to Xinjiang, Urumqi. After settling in Urumqi, they decided to cross the border and settle in the vicinity of the Tajik capital, where they expected to find better income opportunities. The Chinese family arrived in Tajikistan in 2009 and managed to rent a shop on the central bazaar in the Tajik capital to sell, initially imported dry goods from China. They soon observed a demand for particular Chinese vegetables and they found the possibility to lease one hectare of land from a Tajik woman. The Tajik lady clearly acted as a broker to access the land. The terms of agreement are rather vague and uncertain, since the contract is prolonged only monthly, and the family is extremely overcharged for the usage rights (when compared to average rental prices for farm land). The revenues from the fields, together with the shop income, provide the family with good, but not extraordinarily high, income. They sublet their property in China, and all together this will allow them to build up savings for when they decide to go back to China (interview 4 January 2015).

The family rehabilitated the greenhouses, which were left on the fields by earlier tenants, with materials they ordered from China. The greenhouses allow the family to continue cultivating vegetables throughout the year. The produce they sell is of limited diversity: cabbage, spinach, beans, and melons. All the inputs required for production are brought from China. Besides vegetables and dried products, they also sell pork meat that they order from Tajik suppliers. However, there are other principal outlets that are more significant for their business, including Chinese restaurants and Chinese companies that run their own canteens (interview 31 October 2014). Thus, the family has clearly responded to an observed market niche, supplying Chinese individuals and companies. Their business seems to be fairing well, and the family has started to learn some Russian and Tajik. Their young son, who is 15 years old, supports his parents in their work at the bazaar, and is eager to develop a business in Tajikistan (once he is an adult) in the coming years, if he

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<sup>21</sup> Whereas Tajikistan has made a slow transition from a planned economy to a more market-driven economy, privatization of land has not taken place. The Tajik state remains the sole owner of all land. According to the Tajik Land Code, Tajik citizens can obtain inheritable user rights, under which they can rent out their land for a particular period of time. Foreigners can lease land for up to 49 years.

remains in Tajikistan.

Particularly in these kinds of activities, Tajik people experience the Chinese presence and the growth in their population. This occurs in the interaction on the street and in the shops. This contrasts with the often-isolated operations of larger Chinese companies in Tajikistan. I discuss a larger Chinese land investment in Tajikistan in the following section.

## **4.2 Large-scale Chinese land investment in Tajikistan: commercially state-driven?\_**

A large Chinese agricultural land investment in Tajikistan was announced in 2011 and implemented in 2012. The background of this supposed ‘single’ investment is complicated. In fact, there are different projects included under one umbrella<sup>22</sup>: Jing Yin Yin Hai, or in Tajik: Szinnyan Inhai LLC. The total investment is significantly larger than the privately initiated projects described in the preceding section. According to the website of the company, it has registered with RMB 5 million (USD 0.82 million<sup>23</sup>), whereas other sources report figures of RMB 30 million (USD 4.9 million<sup>24</sup>) (Xinhuanet June 12, 2014<sup>25</sup>). The company’s headquarters is set in Dushanbe, and before 2014, there were three working stations in three regions, namely Yovon (cotton, staples and vegetables) Jaloliddini Rumi (staples) and Vahdat (seed factory). ‘They jointly operate over 8239.5 square metres of agricultural land. Their main missions include seed production, division and distribution’ (Huang Fan 2014).

### **4.2.1 Stated intentions and media portrayal of Jing Yin Yin Hai**

The company Jing Yin Yin Hai has been extending through different districts since it started, and by 2015, the operation covered a wider array of activities. Whereas the background and structure is complicated (see section 4.2.2), I first describe the way in which the investments were portrayed and legitimised in Tajikistan, before describing actual developments and observations.

Both Tajik and Chinese media have reported about the investments, mentioning that such investments would increase crop production, conditions of the fields, and upgrade agricultural knowledge and technology (see for instance Junguriat 2012, Nosirdjon 2014, Xinhuanet 2014). Nosirdjon notes that, ‘the main purposes of collaboration is applying modern technology in agriculture, recovering the fields that are not in use anymore’ (2014). Demonstration plots would be established, and Tajik farmers would benefit from learning and knowledge transfer (Nosirdjon 2014, Xinhuanet 2014, Huang Fan 2014). Tajik governmental officials cited in local media, stated that the company might be granted more lands in the future, with the head of the region saying: "We will consider the widening of farming land for this company from the lands that are not in proper use by other farmer communities and expecting further collaboration between company and farmer communities in Yovon and import of new and more fertile seeds of wheat from the farmer of Khenan district" (Nosirdjon 2014).

My own observations and fieldwork however contest the statements of ‘unused’ fields (see Hofman 2013, and Baka 2013 on contested term of ‘unused’, i.e. the political construction of wastelands). In some instances, it indeed regarded abandoned land – for socio-economic and historical reasons beyond the scope

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<sup>22</sup> I discuss the structure shortly hereafter. Interesting to mention is that Chinese overseas companies often feature complicated structures, and sometimes branch out to entirely different sectors, which makes it difficult to unravel the original orientation and focus (I thank Solange Chatelard for valuable insights).

<sup>23</sup> Bloomberg currency converter, <http://www.bloomberg.com/quote/USDCNY:CUR> accessed 14 November 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Bloomberg currency converter, <http://www.bloomberg.com/quote/USDCNY:CUR> accessed 14 November 2014.

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.ha.xinhuanet.com/hnxw/2014-06/12/c\\_1111099152.htm](http://www.ha.xinhuanet.com/hnxw/2014-06/12/c_1111099152.htm), retrieved on 15 October 2014.

of this article – yet in other cases, lands were cultivated years before.<sup>26</sup> It is true that fields in one of the two districts where the Chinese started were highly salinised. However, in 2014 the company withdrew from this location after poor field conditions caused production to fail for two consequent years (fieldwork 2013 and 2014, Ergasheva 2014b). Interestingly, Jing Yin Yin Hai initially refused to settle near the Afghan border for reasons of insecurity, but local media reported that the company eventually took over these fields in 2013 (not confirmed during fieldwork 2015). These aspects indicate that commercial interests play an important role in this investment, and if geopolitical motivations would be the principal drivers behind this investment, the company evidently would not have withdrawn from the area where they faced problems<sup>27</sup>. In the other location however, in the vicinity of the Tajik capital, where infrastructure and field conditions are in relatively good condition, Chinese cultivation has expanded since it began (fieldwork observations 2013 and 2014). While the operation is expanding and can be followed step-by-step, the background of the company remains complicated, and critical in tracing the drivers and their relationship to the Chinese state.

#### **4.2.2 Background of the company**

Jing Yin Yin Hai was officially founded in November 2013 and the structure of the company is complex. What seems to be a single company is actually made up of a complicated structure.

Jing Yin Yin Hai was founded by a Chinese official at the National Ministry of Agriculture (interview 6 January 2015). Initially only involved in the crop seed business, the former official attracted other Chinese companies to expand businesses in Tajikistan. In practice this official, based in the Tajik capital Dushanbe, is not involved in the daily functioning of the Chinese companies that joined, but these companies use his connections both in China and in Tajikistan to gain footing and to continue to work in Tajikistan<sup>28</sup>.

At this stage, there are two principal companies involved in forming a co-venture – Huang Fan commerce and Jing Yin Yin Hai Seeds, both from Henan province, where several other Chinese companies are also from (see also Asia Plus 2014b). The companies' respective operations are different in which crops they grow and approaches they use, as well as where they originate.

Huang Fan is oriented toward the production of cotton, wheat and maize in Tajikistan. As of 2015, aside from research and experimentation with cotton and wheat varieties, the company will contract Tajik farmers to grow cotton (the target for 2015 is to contract cotton-growing farmers totaling an area of 3000 hectares, interview 5 January 2015). The company has its own cotton gin, and will pre-finance farmers for the cotton growing season, including the provision of seeds.

Huang Fan has a long history. The company originates from an area in the province of Henan in central China, and was founded in the late 1940s, after the nationalists in pre-communist China defeated the Japanese and re-colonised the flooded lands. Under nationalist rule, the Americans were on good terms with the Chinese and supported the farms with advanced agricultural machinery and technology. The US forces retreated when the communists came to power. The communists could not operate the machines and Zhou

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<sup>26</sup> According to the workers, the fields appointed to them all belonged to one big landowner. They were surprised about land use patterns and farm reorganisation in Tajikistan. They expressed their impression that land reform had not been executed well, when they asked how it was possible that not everyone had access to land, and how it was possible that one person could control such big pieces of land (interview with Chinese farm worker 5 January 2015).

<sup>27</sup> This resembles observations of Chinese companies in other contexts, such as by Liu Dong in Iraq, who states: 'my hypothesis is that while the investments made by Chinese NOCs in Iran and Iraq are incapable of improving China's energy security, their involvements in these two resource-rich countries will receive limited support from the Chinese government and, consequently, their investment decisions in this regard are primarily driven by commercial considerations' (Liu 2014, 566).

<sup>28</sup> Telling, in this regard, is the fact that the well-placed former official persuaded another Chinese farmer, who cultivated fields in one of the districts since 2012, to move to a district further north (fieldwork January 2015).

Enlai (first appointed premier from the People's Republic of China in 1949) appointed the newly established collective farm to utilise the machinery to rejuvenate the fields. Huang Fan benefited from the infrastructure left behind by the Americans, such as telephones and machinery, which were rare in those days. Henan, the region of origin of the company, is known as the food stock of China. It is the region's (political) mission to uphold food production, and to advance and lead agricultural production. The Huang Fan farm has an important role in this objective, as workers are taught about 'turning wasteland into productive farmland'

(interview 6 January 2015).<sup>29</sup> The home base of the farm in Henan has sixteen locations, and the specialists now working in Tajikistan have been sent from different locations. It took two generations to build up the farm to the way it is now.

The workers take pride in their history, and talk emotionally about the history of their farm. They have the idea to do charity work in Tajikistan, while fulfilling the goals of the Chinese government (interview 6 January 2015). The vision of the Chinese workers does not point to commercial aims, but the actual activities of the company do (i.e. expanding cotton production through contract-farming, including the processing and sales).

Concurring with Huang Fan's cultivation of cotton and staple crops is Jing Yin Yin Hai Seeds' focus on producing vegetables, which primarily takes place in newly built greenhouses. Jing Yin Yin Hai was established in 2007, specialising in seeds and agricultural commerce, in cooperation with a few Chinese local research institutions. In Tajikistan the company primarily deals with production of vegetables to be sold in local markets. The managers are eager to expand the operation in the coming years, in order to become the largest vegetable producing enterprise of Central Asia, with outlets to Russia, Afghanistan and further abroad (interview 6 January 2015). The production to date comprises vegetables that are used in Tajik cuisine, such as onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, chili peppers, as well as less common Chinese beans, melons, eggplant and cabbage grown on smaller plots. In doing so, the company's sales are diversifying local produce, and may have the potential to enrich Tajik diets. This latter point may be particularly important now that Tajik small-scale farmers are also experimenting with new vegetables that were introduced by the Chinese, such as broccoli and Chinese cabbage.

The vegetables produced are sold on local markets (mainly in the capital), but there are no particular, special outlets – in contrast with the above discussion of farm production by individuals and Chinese households (fieldwork interviews 2013, fieldwork November 2014). The company partly sells its own produce, while other crops are traded by Chinese businessmen who have private food retail businesses.

For staple crops cotton, and other vegetables, the companies involved primarily use inputs (seeds, fertilizers, defoliants, techniques) brought from China (see also Huang Fan 2014, Xinhuanet 2014). The construction material, including plastics and bamboo stalks longer than four metres, are brought overland through the Pamir Mountains. This is a cumbersome, dangerous corridor that is nevertheless critical for moving Chinese supplies. Yet, besides this particular flow of tangible resources from China to Tajikistan, it is very difficult to retrieve information on the extent to which companies are actually supported by the Chinese state. I discuss this in the following section.

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<sup>29</sup> According to Chinese sources, Huang Fan is also involved in Chinese investment in the Ukraine, where they established a joint venture with a Ukrainian company. The investments in the Ukraine and Tajikistan seem to be the only two projects where the company is involved in. [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4de7be930102v4ml.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4de7be930102v4ml.html) (Accessed on 21-10-2014). Chinese workers in Tajikistan are well aware about the company's investment in the Ukraine. The propaganda also contains the purpose of the company's investment in the Ukraine, which is to turn wasteland into productive land (interviews 7 January 2015).

### 4.2.3 State support

Chinese companies in Tajikistan cannot operate without critical connections, referring to both their Chinese and Tajik connections. At the same time, it is hard to observe and unravel particular elite or political connections. First, local *Tajik* brokers and elites are critical for the Chinese actors to settle and set up their businesses or operations, both in cases of small and large Chinese agricultural projects.

Second, but no less important for Chinese companies in Tajikistan, may be Chinese state support. The principle supporters of the Chinese agricultural companies farming in Tajikistan seem entirely provincial (see also Xinhuanet 2014), in which the Chinese former official has been pushing and initiating overarching investment. It seems logical that the company has benefited from the agricultural cooperation agreement between China and Tajikistan (Yuldoshev 2014b), but it has not been confirmed in interviews. The former official, who initiated Jing Yin Yin Hai's settlement and expansion, has been responsible for attracting the required capital. According to Chinese media, Jing Yin Yin Hai is the first agricultural company from Henan that has executed the 'going out strategy'. As mentioned above, with the Third Plenum of November 2013, which included the goal of accelerating the 'going out' of agricultural companies, and furthering the Silk Road Economic Belt, Henan province launched plans to expand companies' overseas investments<sup>30</sup> (Xinhuanet 2014, see also a blog post on [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4de7be930102v4ml.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4de7be930102v4ml.html)<sup>31</sup>).

The widely pursued degree of decentralisation of the Chinese governmental structure implies that activities – even overseas – undertaken by lower levels of authority, such as provinces, are not necessarily monitored or taken up by Beijing. One observation exemplifying this is the fact that the Chinese ambassador has not once visited the project with the Tajik president. In case of stronger governmental involvement, instructions would have been detailed before any visit would take place.

Hence, the company's 'going out' in Tajikistan follows the government's stated plans to facilitate the globalisation of its companies. There are no indications that there is a strong connection to the Chinese central government, technically nor politically. What is remarkable is the fact that the Chinese farm workers are forced on their own to experiment and test suitable cropping methods and inputs. Furthermore, the Chinese companies are solely responsible in competing with Tajik traders for market outlets in nearby urban areas (fieldwork 2015).

The company's strategy and approach fits into the 'developmental outsourcing' trend briefly mentioned above, which follows the bilateral agreement between Henan province and the Tajik government. As was stated in Chinese media Xinhua, 'the (...) farms actively implement the "going out" strategy, namely the establishment of agricultural investment company in Tajikistan and the Ukraine, became the province's first "go out" large state-owned farms run by agricultural enterprises<sup>32</sup>'. In this sense, this particular investment in Tajikistan might not be of a different nature than other Chinese global investments, which are part of larger loan and investment packages (see for instance Alden and Hughes 2009, 575; Hofman and Ho 2012, Strauss 2009, Tan-Mullins *et al.* 2010).

The spread and increase in Chinese agricultural projects becomes more complicated to keep track of over the years. In addition to the research and demonstration components of the investment described above, there are a few more Chinese individuals and small groups working in agriculture in Tajikistan (fieldwork 2012, fieldwork 2014-2015). There are Chinese individuals building greenhouses and growing crops, and

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<sup>30</sup> Remarkable is that Jing Yin Yin Hai registered another co-venture in 2010 with a company in Xinjiang. This loosely conforms to the general flow of migration and the Far West program, in this case for seemingly private motives. The counterpart in this co-venture in Xinjiang originates from the 5th Division of Xinjiang's Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps.

<sup>31</sup> The website re-blogged an article from "China agriculture" magazine [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_4de7be930102v4ml.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_4de7be930102v4ml.html) [Accessed 21 October 2014].

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.ha.xinhuanet.com/hnxw/2014-06/12/c\\_1111099152.htm](http://www.ha.xinhuanet.com/hnxw/2014-06/12/c_1111099152.htm), retrieved on 15 October 2014.

small teams of Chinese researchers conducting experiments on rice and cotton. In some other districts, they have also set up cotton processing facilities (Avesta 2015, fieldwork February 2015). Interestingly, my impression is that some projects initiated by Chinese actors are made public only after their actual implementation.

To sum up, it is clear that engagement of Chinese enterprises and individuals, also in agriculture, continues to increase, even more so since more provincial authorities seek to invest in Tajikistan's agriculture (see for instance Yuldoshev 2014a). What these may bring is not known to date, but what is clear is that different, sometimes overlapping drivers constitute China's farm projects in its neighbouring region. I will wrap up and summarise the above in the conclusion below.

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have aimed to highlight the variety of Chinese actors involved in the Tajik economy today, with particular reference to land, and the factors that drive them to invest in Tajikistan.

China's presence in Tajikistan has become more pronounced since the start of the last decade (Sodiqov 2009, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012, Ibraimov 2009, see also Peyrouse 2007, Alimov 2012, Kassenova 2009). Numerous projects and investments in the economy have been implemented in the last two decades, initially in the primary industry, followed by more sophisticated economic activities and petty trade in the past five years.

While state-backed agreements have clearly been the vehicle for further Chinese expansion in the region, smaller scale Chinese entrepreneurship also plays a major role in the Central Asian economies today. In terms of numbers, the smaller scale activities clearly outnumber the larger investments, and it is also through the particular small-scale initiatives that daily interactions between Chinese and Tajik people take shape. In terms of size, and in terms of media attention, it is however the larger more long-term investment this is more pronounced. A related issue, which I have left unexplored here, and as earlier remarked by Henderson *et al.* (2013, 1240) is the fact that: 'the combinations of investment by Chinese SOE and private companies, aid flows that subsidize some of that investment and encourage participation by political elites, as well as trade and migration dynamics, have diverse outcomes that can be spatially specific'.

So how can we explain China's increasing presence in Tajikistan more specifically, and how can we understand China's involvement in agriculture? Whereas the agricultural projects were only implemented in 2011 and 2012, less visible, smaller scale farming by Chinese people has been taking place for the last five years.

As mentioned in the above, China's global rise has often been portrayed as a strongly state-driven, state-backed development. China's presence in the Central Asian region has multiple drivers, which are not solely led by the central Chinese government. Without any doubt, the political instability of the region and geopolitics play a significant role in China's growing presence in the region. The national states' political and social dynamics warrant Chinese attention. However as Breslin notes, 'We can (...) argue about what drives what—whether international security concerns drive a change in economic strategy to mollify the region, or domestic political/economic perspectives drive a move to engage the region' (2009, 834).

What would explain Chinese land acquisitions in this land scarce, food insecure context? Tajikistan does not bear much potential for highly productive agriculture. As described above, transport of goods to China is limited, which explicates that Chinese domestic food security is certainly not a driver behind these agricultural investments and projects. It is clear that Chinese state investments pave ways for Chinese actors to enter the Central Asian frontier zone. This is not a driver as such, but it may help the Chinese state to monitor social and political instability, by increasing presence literally 'on the ground'.

As a *first* driver, the provincial authority of Henan province, involved in the agricultural deals, seems to pursue investments for market development and global expansion of its companies. The benefits of the kind

of bilateral agreements it has signed with Tajik authorities, is that they accrue larger companies with a base in China. This is as a driver, probably more so than regional stability, plays a role.

Thus, there are many provincial government objectives expressed in these agricultural investments, such as the *second* driver: the *commercial* drive of companies. In fact, ‘commercial’ is a container term for a variety of business considerations, with very different strategies and outcomes. Individual Chinese entrepreneurs undertake farming to supply the Chinese migrants abroad, whether through self-consumption or through produce for Chinese restaurants. In this way, Chinese workers meet their private consumption demand for Chinese food, which cannot be found on the local bazaars. For some who find outlets and produce more than just for subsistence, the sales of produce provide them with surplus income. The Chinese family described above, which grows Chinese vegetables for commercial use, has found a (profitable) niche in the market. They have their own special outlets for their crops.

The larger Chinese company, Jing Yin Yin Hai operates on a much larger scale. For the companies included in this amalgam, local conventional outlets seem to suffice, at least to date, the company is actively branching out. They hope to gain more established footing on the ground. They purpose the further expansion of sales networks and adaptability of their varieties in the Central Asian region. For this company farming may be a vehicle to test and showcase new varieties of crops and new technologies. It develops its commerce through the export of technology. By providing showcases of new seeds and farming technologies, a new market in the neighbouring agrarian societies may open up. The provincial company’s perspective is medium or long-term. This tendency thus reverses the common narrative on Chinese agricultural ventures abroad. Instead of aiming for importing food back to China, it is about exporting agricultural technology. What is more, at this stage the company is supplying, and by doing so, enriching the Tajik market with new crops, which in fact is an improvement in the availability of vegetables, particularly in the winter season. Thus, while this is an initial early development, for the Tajik consumer, it is not negative per se – in contrast to common (and initial) assumptions that ‘land grabs’ deprive local populations from access to food (most often the focus is on deprivation of already food insecure African states, see for instance Grain 2008, Cotula *et al.* 2009, for critique see Bräutigam and Zhang 2013, Gong and le Billon 2014).

Lastly, as a *third* driver, I distinguish a socio-political aspect, which is expressed through the ‘going out’ strategy of Chinese provincial and national authorities. Labour issues and domestic market competition are important imperatives of cross border mobility. Increasingly, since the opening up of borders along China’s western border, Chinese individuals and companies search for fortune abroad, in Central Asia, but also in Mongolia and in Russia’s Far East. This development is partially led by the Chinese state through start-up subsidies and ‘far west development’, but a substantial part of Chinese settlement in Tajikistan has been self-initiated. By outmigration, whether as an individual, group or company, the Chinese authorities and Chinese people seek livelihoods, fortune and affluence across borders.

To wrap up: Chinese cross border activities in the Central Asian neighbouring economies are driven by and exemplify Chinese domestic issues and policies that are characteristic for this border zone, but at the same time, the nature of investments fit into the general pattern of China’s global expansion. While there may not be major differences with China in Central Asia, compared to China elsewhere; the kinds of investment and interaction are specific, particularly when it comes to individual cross border interaction. Lack of employment opportunities, the competition on the domestic market, meager retirement payments, and stringent labour regulations, are driving Chinese cross border activities and migration. Different Chinese actors have become engaged in the Tajik economy, and by the same token, the kinds of Chinese actors and their activities in Tajik agriculture are also diverse. These are not all part of one coordinated effort to expand China’s presence in the region.

The case of China in Tajikistan exemplifies that China’s rise in the border zone is resulting from the country’s social and economic dynamics, but also from the relatively recent opening up of borders. Chinese public and private needs, such as political control and individual fortune, drive Chinese cross border

investment. Understanding China's role in, and drivers of, foreign farming thus requires zooming in on context-specific characteristics. Only through such an exercise, the complicated amalgams of Chinese actors can be unpacked and container concepts can be challenged.

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