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Everyday Politics of Global China: Looking to, Reflecting on, and Enacting Authority in Rural Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

The visible manifestations of Global China, and the responses these manifestations elicit, are at the centre of much of the scholarly literature on, and popular interest in, China's growing global presence. What is less often considered is what China's role in foreign jurisdictions implies for state–society relations in those countries. This article, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in rural Tajikistan in 2020 and 2021, examines encounters between Chinese companies and Tajik bureaucrats, farmers and labourers. It highlights three dynamics: (1) Tajik labourers working on Chinese companies' fields turn to authority when encountering injustice: they express sovereign agency and a desire 'for the state'; (2) labourers' and farmers' experiences with Chinese companies prompt people to rethink their relationship with authority; and (3) bureaucrats exercise the authority of the state vis-à-vis Chinese actors. They 'hyper-follow' the law. The article demonstrates that Chinese companies introduce new sets of relationships, thereby affecting state and legal consciousness. In the context of starkly contrasting perceptions about China in Tajikistan, encounters with Chinese companies elicit responses that reveal that contradictions lie at the core of perceptions of what the Tajik state is, and should do.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal and principles of the enterprise are to find a basis for cooperation, through hard work, pure intellect and wisdom ... adhering to and searching for a common point of view. In addition, full respect for one another, prevention of disagreement and/or conflict related to cultural differences, reconciliation and restoration of relations, respect for moral and behavioural standards, which are accepted by society, [are some] of the main requirements of the company.¹

Random visitors to a Chinese–Tajik agribusiness in rural Tajikistan might find it hard to understand the text on the billboards adorning the company's parking lot. The text is written in a literary style that people do not use

1. Text (translated from Tajik) on a billboard adorning the parking lot of a Chinese agribusiness compound.

in their everyday life. The words convey companionship and cooperation, resonating with the rhetoric of friendship that is often used in Chinese–Tajik relations (Hofman, 2024), and in many of China’s other bilateral relations (Bunkenborg et al., 2022).

The Chinese presence in Tajikistan has increased over the past two decades (Hofman, 2022). Bilateral ties are close, and the two states also interact in the framework of regional and multilateral initiatives. The first large Chinese enterprises, engaged in infrastructure, entered the country in the mid-2000s, and the diversity and number of Chinese companies has increased ever since, getting a particular boost with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. The Chinese presence comprises individual migrants and entrepreneurs alongside private companies and large state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and China Aid is also active in the country (ibid.). Chinese loans and credits to the Tajik state have also increased in importance over the years. According to Ziyaev et al. (2024: 13), the Chinese Export-Import Bank’s credits comprised ‘nearly one-third of total external debt’ of the Tajik state in 2023. As a result of these dynamics, the Chinese presence is highly visible: it is seen, for instance, in the new government buildings erected in Tajikistan’s capital city, Dushanbe, financed by the Chinese state; in infrastructure and mining projects undertaken by Chinese companies in various parts of the country; and in the variety of Chinese goods on offer in Tajik markets.

China’s role in Tajikistan’s rural economy is equally diverse. The first relatively large Chinese farm enterprise entered Tajikistan in 2012 (Hofman, 2024), and others have followed, including two large Chinese companies discussed in this article. In addition, a number of small-scale, individual farm enterprises are operating in Tajikistan. The activities of these Chinese actors vary, and the imperatives driving their operations differ: for some private entrepreneurs, Tajikistan offers a new market for agricultural inputs, such as crop seed (ibid.; Spies, 2025), while others produce Chinese or local varieties of vegetables to supply local consumers and the Chinese community in the country. The large enterprises discussed in this article engage in cotton production (to a limited extent, one of them also produces food crops) and partner with Tajikistan’s ruling elites. As noted further below, rather than commerce, it is politics that seems to drive these investments, namely, strengthening ties with Tajikistan’s regime and supporting economic development in the country, which borders China’s Xinjiang province. At the same time, investments have also expanded the market for cotton and various Chinese agricultural inputs. Given this diversity of Chinese actors, activities and motivations, Tajikistan can be considered a microcosm that can offer rich insights into the manifestations of Global China more generally. As others have pointed out, the drivers of globalization among Chinese agribusinesses are manifold; political and commercial interests or imperatives often intertwine and are sometimes difficult to disentangle (Bräutigam and Zhang, 2013; Spies, 2025; Zhan, 2022).

This article engages the literature in critical geopolitics (Carter and Woodyer, 2020; Jansen, 2009, 2014; McConnell, 2017); citizenship and the anthropology of the state (Bryant and Reeves, 2021; Reeves, 2014; Verheul, 2021); and the scholarship on Global China (DiCarlo, 2025; Lee, 2022). I analyse the politics of place (Reeves, 2014; Yalçin-Heckmann, 2012) in the context of Chinese agribusinesses' operations in southwest Tajikistan, and examine encounters between Tajik bureaucrats, labourers, farmers and Chinese farm enterprises. Chinese agribusinesses are unique in southwest Tajikistan in terms of the nature of their operations and, especially, the ways in which they involve and interact with the rural population. The Chinese companies employ segments of the rural population for farm work; they hire and fire people — including women — who had never worked for foreign employers before. Thus, the activities of these Chinese agricultural companies are a prominent way in which Tajik people directly, and profoundly, experience China's globalization and geopolitics in their everyday lives. In contrast, most other foreign actors operating in rural areas of Tajikistan are international donors and NGOs whose projects are primarily undertaken and implemented by national staff and local organizations.² It is in urban areas that other foreign organizations, companies and expatriates interact more frequently and more directly with the Tajik population.

I offer an empirically rich analysis of everyday Global China in rural Tajikistan. Research on Global China has increased in recent years, and a growing body of work sheds light on multiple factors and contingencies that structure the unfolding of China's globalization (see, for instance, DiCarlo, 2025; Lee, 2022), noting that Chinese companies increasingly localize — in other words, they contour to local relations (Lee, 2022). Relatively underexplored are the 'affective encounters' between Chinese and local actors (Wu, 2021), and the impact of the Chinese presence on people's relations with authority and with the state in the everyday, at the micro level. Understanding domestic dynamics, that is, grasping 'the actual influence of [Global] China' (Lee, 2022: 320), requires recognition of the '[h]uman experiences, uneven effects, differentiated views, and complex social relations and politics [that] lie behind the hypervisible spectacle of the BRI' and China's global presence more generally (DiCarlo, 2025: 125). Yet granular analysis, beyond observations of street-level protests or everyday resistance triggered by the Chinese presence in other societies, and meso- and macro-level studies of China's impact on existing authority structures (Karrar and Mostowlansky, 2020; Loughlin, 2025) is scarce.

2. At the time of fieldwork in 2020–21, there was one other foreign company engaged in cotton production in the southwestern region of Tajikistan. Unlike the Chinese enterprises, however, this company did not engage in cotton production itself but contracted Tajik farmers. As such, relations with the rural population were different. There is more foreign involvement in agriculture in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region.

Following Nosheen Ali, who studied state–citizenship relations in a disputed territory within Pakistan, where people expressed aspirations to citizenship, I provide an ‘ethnographic glimpse of the lived practices through which the state–citizen relation is made, felt, and reworked’ (Ali, 2019: 8) in Tajikistan. Trajectories of socio-political change are the result of various dynamics, including migration, digital technology and interactions and experiences with trans-local actors. To date, scholarly literature on the state and state–society relations in Central Asia has foregrounded micro-level dynamics (Reeves, 2014), or the ways in which the state is transformed within globalization, becoming networked with transnational institutions (Heathershaw, 2011). There is relatively little work that bridges these two dimensions and considers the ways in which global dynamics, such as China’s globalization and geopolitical rivalries, reverberate and are experienced on the ground, and with what result. Here I do not imply that the impact of the Chinese presence can be understood in isolation. As Franceschini and Loubere (2022: 1) note, China is not ‘an external force with the potential to impact the “normal” functioning of things’. The unusual activities of Chinese companies in rural Tajikistan — compared to other foreigner actors, as noted above — and the interactions and responses they elicit, merit attention. They illuminate dynamism in state–citizen interactions that an analysis of domestic encounters alone may not reveal. While the Tajik government seeks to control state narratives, encounters on and around the farm fields happen in the interstices of state order. My analysis renders visible such dynamics, which can contribute to a study of the anthropology of the state beyond the case of Tajikistan itself.

I foreground three dynamics in this article. First, labourers working on Chinese farm fields turn to the state to seek recognition and support for their experiences, particularly in the context of perceived injustices. In doing so, they ‘define the space of the state’ (see Yalçın-Heckmann, 2012: 1735, noted in the context of the South Caucasus); they express state consciousness (Verheul, 2021), that is, a desire for the state (see Jansen, 2014); and they invoke the law, ‘not for incorporation *within*, but for recognition of ... rule-bound ordering’ (Verheul, 2021: 234, emphasis in original). Thus, the activities of Chinese actors present a metaphor through which people express their perceptions of the Tajik state. Second, for some labourers and farmers, interactions with Chinese companies offer a new vantage point from which to reflect on domestic actors’ policies and practices. Third, some bureaucrats take on the mantle of the state in relation to Chinese actors, and do so more forcefully than in relation to domestic actors, applying the law to the letter. Instead of interpreting this as performative and a fetishization of law (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2007), I interpret this legal behaviour productively: bureaucrats ‘hyper-follow’ the law, even if this may subsequently be undone by top-level elite interference.

This article is structured as follows. I describe the methodology and discuss positionality in the next section. I then present the theoretical

framework, in which I focus on critical and everyday geopolitics; citizenship and the state. The subsequent section offers empirical insights; here, I analyse and describe the interactions between Chinese agribusinesses on the one hand, and labourers, farmers and individual state officials, on the other. The final section concludes. I contend that interactions with Chinese companies give rise to expressions that reveal people's expectations of their state. Indeed, Chinese companies introduce new sets of relationships, which affect state and legal consciousness. In the words of Verheul (2021: 232): 'understandings and expectations of the state ... held both by citizens and civil servants, their "state consciousness" are affected by global dynamics, which, in the context studied in this article, are seen in the presence of Chinese agribusiness in rural Tajikistan.

METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY

This article is based on 20 months of extensive fieldwork in Tajikistan, between January 2020 and August 2021. Thus, fieldwork took place during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. I arrived in Tajikistan in the first week of January 2020 and decided to stay when the pandemic reached the country. In contrast to many other governments, the Tajik state did not enforce a lockdown. However, I took precautionary measures to protect my interlocutors and myself and halted travel and close interaction with people for several months; from July 2020 onwards, I gradually returned to visiting districts again, always adhering to ethics requirements of the University of Oxford.

Where permissible, I combined ethnographic research with interviews with a variety of actors in small towns and urban centres, including officials working at various levels of the state and agricultural scientists. Ethnographic research was focused on Tajikistan's southwestern Khatlon region. I lived alternately in two villages in different districts, where I had also stayed between 2012 and 2015, for my doctoral research. My hosts were extended families; as is typical for Tajikistan, one or more sons were working in Russia and women (of various ages) were engaged in farm work. Some of the people that I knew very well interacted with Chinese agribusinesses regularly. During the day, I walked, cycled, or drove around in my own car, and frequented Chinese company fields and bases on (at least) a two-weekly basis, where I mingled with labourers and other staff. In the areas surrounding the Chinese company bases and fields I met with various farmers on a daily basis. My interactions with Chinese staff were limited, as a result of several factors: the number of Chinese staff members in these companies was small (challenging conventional wisdom that Chinese companies employ mostly Chinese workers), and most work undertaken in the public space was carried out by Tajik individuals. Sometimes one or two Chinese foremen were present at the field site, but my lack of Chinese

language skills and their inability to speak English or Tajik complicated interactions. However, I had a few key Chinese interlocutors who shared insights and helped establish contacts, and Tajik company staff often helped by translating conversations. In addition to the language barrier, I observed that Chinese foremen and field managers' willingness to share their experiences about life and work in Tajikistan was limited, perhaps a result of time constraints but presumably also given a lack of trust, and I observed that some had difficulty situating me (Hofman, 2025b). I learned from various short conversations that many Chinese male workers only stayed in Tajikistan for a year or two and lived a segregated life there, in company compounds. I did not gain access to the headquarters of one company, and there was one base of a Chinese agribusiness where an individual (male) from a nearby locality joined me; without him, the Tajik base manager did not permit me to visit the area.³ The few interviews I held with this manager remained at a general, formal level, but I had several conversations with Tajik labourers working for the company.

As suggested by the above, there were implicit and explicit boundaries drawn by my interlocutors and other actors; some acted as gatekeepers, constraining my access to sites and individuals. Fieldwork on the politically sensitive cotton sector, as well as on the Chinese presence, in Tajikistan is challenging. I had to navigate a political atmosphere marked by extreme inequality and repression, requiring utmost care not to put interlocutors at risk. I was affiliated with domestic (i.e. Tajik) academic institutes during my stay, where I offered a few lectures and interacted with students and staff. This affiliation enabled my research. My fieldwork also benefited from the rapport I had built in earlier years: as noted, I undertook fieldwork in Tajikistan for my dissertation, and I also lived there for several months in 2019.

Thus, I have lived and worked in different parts of rural Tajikistan over the years. I have spent a lot of time with my host families in southwest Tajikistan since 2012, sharing important life-cycle moments and building up close friendships and trust, and have established good relations with many others, including men and women labourers in Chinese agribusinesses and farmers. I have gained in-depth insights into people's lives, their relation to authority, and intrahousehold dynamics. As a Dutch woman undertaking research focused on the Chinese presence in Tajikistan, interacting with diverse Tajik as well as Chinese actors, I often felt I had to navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting worlds (Hofman, 2025b). In this article, I aim to shed light on contradictions and frictions with regard to the Chinese presence and the state in rural Tajikistan by analysing and giving voice to various people's expressions, thoughts and perceptions, and, following feminist

3. In this regard, my interactions with another Chinese company were less problematic (see Hofman, 2024).

geopolitics scholarship, to (re)situate ‘knowledge production as a partial view from somewhere’ (Hyndman, 2004: 309; see also McConnell, 2017).

CRITICAL AND FEMINIST GEOPOLITICS, CITIZENSHIP AND THE STATE

Across the world, ‘citizenship is mutating’ (Bryant, 2024: 394). This development is ‘attributed to global processes of migration, multicultural movements, global human rights discourses and neoliberal economic and political processes’ (Yalçin-Heckmann, 2012: 1736). And, while global flows and the porousness of borders challenge the state’s territorial control, that is, they trigger a denationalization or deterritorialization of the state (Sassen, 2004), encounters with a foreign ‘outside’ can also cause a strengthening of nationhood and of place-based identities. As Heathershaw and Schatz (2017) argue, with reference to the Central Asian context: ‘Global politics continue to flow *through* states in such a way as to *alter* the state *gradually* and progressively rather than supplant it’ (ibid.: 3, emphasis on ‘gradually’ added). In doing so, global politics affect state–citizenship relations. ‘[Any] theory of the state [and understanding of processes of social change] needs to take into account its constitution through a complex set of ... intersecting representations and practices’ (Gupta, 1995: 377). As such, analyses of social change cannot be confined to considering domestic power configurations alone. However, while ideas, expectations and manifestations of the state, identity and citizenship are embedded in global dynamics, they are often still associated with territoriality (see, for instance, Davis, 2020; Reeves, 2014; Yalçin-Heckmann, 2012).

Research focusing on the lived experiences of globalization and geopolitics often revolves around identity, citizenship and life in border regions and frontier zones (Eggart, 2024; Jansen, 2009), examining how these phenomena affect and are experienced in daily life. While recent decades have witnessed an intensification of global interactions, including in terms of people, capital, norms and knowledge, territorial borders have not vanished and in some places have been re-established or strengthened, differentiating citizens from non-citizens (Isin, 2024). Borders may be formal or physical borders, or imagined ones, as in the cases discussed in this article, where Tajik and Chinese individuals interact on Tajik territory. Borders are constructed, maintained, or articulated in encounters with an outside other and can elicit the affirmation of citizenship and expressions of sovereign agency, which refers to ‘something desired’ (Bryant, 2024: 395); it does not refer to something accomplished. As Bryant notes, it is an aspiration: ‘*sovereign agency* may be used to summarize what citizens expect from citizenship, an expectation that is never fully realized but that nevertheless defines what a “real” or “normal” state should do’ (ibid., emphasis in original).

In this analysis, following and quoting Bryant and Reeves (2021: 14), I examine the ways in which ‘the state is called into being in the minutiae of

daily life', in encounters with Chinese agribusinesses. In her work on Zimbabwe, Verheul (2021) observed that, despite grave human rights violations and the absence of the rule of law, people did appeal to courts; they showed recognition of the state, using a language of stateness. In rural Tajikistan, I recorded similar expressions of 'state consciousness', albeit less formalized. That is, people did not appeal to courts, but they did turn to the state and referred to the moral economy, using a rights discourse, and in doing so, reified the state. In this way, interactions with the Chinese enterprises offered people, albeit unconsciously, 'opportunities to perform their understanding of citizenship as an expression of belief in a state that protected their rights, and in the process safeguarded what they saw as their civility, dignity, humanity and morality' (Verheul, 2021: 86, writing about Zimbabwe).

I engage critical geopolitics and feminist geopolitics scholarship to examine embodied epistemologies, ground developments and unpack grand discourses (Hyndman, 2004; McConnell, 2017) related to the state, relations of authority, and China. As Carter and Woodyer (2020: 1046) state: it is imperative to include the "everyday" and the "ordinary" into our accounts of the [grand and the] geopolitical ... [as] different scales are not separate but intertwined'. In the following sections, I reveal ambivalence and ambiguity with respect to the Tajik state as well as the Chinese presence.

TURNING TO, REFLECTING ON, AND ENACTING AUTHORITY

State, Authority and Society in Tajikistan

Notions of citizenship and the state in Tajikistan have been undergoing changes since independence in 1991 and the country's civil war (1992–97). Resonating with observations by Mostowlansky (2013), various of my interlocutors in southwest Tajikistan did not see the Tajik state as a credible actor which was able to achieve or safeguard peace and harmony, and attend to local needs. Such perceptions were more pronounced in some localities than in others, in part reflecting differences in the ways people related to the ruling regime, which date back to the civil war. Most of my interlocutors identified with the war-time opposition and I often recorded feelings of alienation; since the 1990s people had lost representative power in the state (see also Hofman, 2017), a loss that has deepened in recent years as the regime has consolidated control. Tajikistan has effectively turned into a one-party state. In this context, expressions *against* the state might appear common. Yet I also encountered expressions *for* the state, and it is this contradiction and ambivalence which is worth addressing. Alongside this dynamic within Tajik territory, outbound migration also affects notions of identity and citizenship: Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent economies of the world, and many people

seek to acquire a foreign passport (Bahovadinova, 2024; Borisova, 2020; see also Hofman, 2021a).

Scholarship on state–society relations and the legal culture in Central Asia highlights two characteristics. The first is a sense of distrust, cynicism and widespread disillusionment about the state, and the feeling that informality prevails (Heathershaw, 2011; Rasanayagam et al., 2014; Reeves, 2014). The second, related characteristic is the notion that politics is performative (Rasanayagam et al., 2014), and that there is a fetishization of law (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 2007). However, the popularity of petitioning and the growth of court cases seem to belie these characterizations, even if court cases are typically mundane, run-of-the-mill cases.⁴ Indeed, there is more to law than merely serving as a tool to repress or resist (Marat and McCarthy, 2020; Merry, 1990; Verheul, 2021). As Verheul (2021: 9) argues: law is ‘a language and practice through which citizens can express their expectations of the state’; it is a language of stateness (see also Hansen and Stepputat, 2001).

The Activities and Labour Regime of Chinese Companies

The agricultural sector is important for Tajikistan’s economy. Agriculture accounts for around 20 per cent of the country’s GDP and the rural economy employs just under 50 per cent of the labour force.⁵ At the same time, the economy relies to a large extent on migrant remittances, demonstrating that, for the majority of the population, farming does not provide a sufficient livelihood, including for those living in the relatively fertile lowland parts of the country (Hofman and Visser, 2021).

For years, the Tajik state has looked to foreign and international organizations and private investors to develop the agricultural economy (Hofman, 2025a). The first relatively large Chinese agribusiness entered Tajikistan in 2012, a joint venture oriented towards seed breeding, vegetable and cotton production (Hofman, 2024). This company was followed some two years later by two large Chinese agribusinesses — one SOE and one private company.⁶ Their operations are concentrated on cotton production and processing, in which they partner with Tajikistan’s ruling elites’

4. Interview with a lawyer, 9 December 2020 in Dushanbe. By facilitating access to courts and encouraging petitioning, the state seeks to demonstrate that it is responsive to citizens’ concerns and provides possibilities for airing grievances. Such grievance mechanisms also provide the state with insight into societal concerns (see also Hofman 2021c).

5. Statistics from the International Labour Organization: https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/country-profiles/?ref_area=TJK (accessed 21 December 2024).

6. During fieldwork, I observed that the two companies collaborated. Further discussion about this interaction is beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth noting that the companies’ operations did not (significantly) differ, and that company ownership is not relevant for the analysis.

enterprises. Cotton is Tajikistan's strategic crop and is largely controlled by ruling elites (Hofman, 2017). With their investments, the Chinese companies responded to interests of the Tajik state to upgrade the cotton value chain (Hofman, 2025a) and strengthen ties with the Tajik regime. For example, one of the companies, the SOE, built a giant textile park close to the birthplace of Tajikistan's president, and upgraded various elite-owned production facilities. However, there might be more motives driving these investments. Security, that is social and political stability by means of rural, economic development in Tajikistan, which borders China's autonomous Xinjiang province, presumably plays a role in these companies' operations, and their investments have also expanded the market for agricultural inputs and cotton, as noted above. In addition to engaging in the primary production of cotton, the companies source cotton from Tajik farmers. Examining the interactions revolving around these companies is instructive given the various complex power dynamics involved: while they partner with the ruling elite, they employ local labourers and procure cotton from local farmers, and access land under different tenure relations.⁷ They have become enmeshed in complex labour, land and cotton politics.

The area of land under Chinese companies' control fluctuates year by year, and reportedly comprises over 15,000 hectares, in an agricultural economy with around 850,000 hectares of sown land (TajStat, 2021). The fields used by Chinese companies will not easily escape a traveller's attention: if one travels by car from Dushanbe to the southeast, one passes huge fields largely covered with plastic mulch, particularly visible early in the agricultural season. Some fields seem to stretch to the horizon. Later in the season, these cotton fields contrast with those of Tajik farmers in the uniform height of the plants. In terms of visibility, the contrast of the Chinese companies' operations with other foreign actors' activities is stark in a different way: the latter's activities are often hardly noticeable, except for signposts or small plaques or billboards adorning a road or building here or there.

The regime of control, command and labour in the Chinese companies is highly gendered. Apart from a few specialists and foremen, employees in these Chinese companies are Tajik men and women. Male Tajik labourers are responsible for mechanized practices, while women undertake manual labour, such as weeding, thinning and topping the plants, as well as (a part of) harvesting. A Tajik male, supervised by a Chinese manager, usually oversees specific parcels of land (sizes vary, but can be up to around 400 hectares). Women leaders work under a male manager and are responsible for labour recruitment and the work on smaller parcels of land (e.g. 50–100 hectares). While men are not always present in the field during the season,

7. Both companies have gained access to formerly 'abandoned' land, which they can lease for a maximum of 50 years, and also lease land from elite and smaller farms for periods ranging from one to around five years.

they are well represented during harvesting. They monitor the work, and weigh and register the harvested cotton at the end of the day. Labour is hired by the day or the week. Only the managers and the women's brigade (production unit) leaders are contracted by the company.

For many rural labourers, particularly for women who have always worked on farms within their local community, working for the Chinese represents their first encounter with a foreign employer. However, in only a few instances do women labourers directly interact with Chinese staff. This is different for male labourers such as tractor drivers, who regularly visit company bases where they meet Chinese labourers. Nevertheless, language barriers often constrain conversations (Hofman, 2021b), and interactions are often mediated by Tajik interpreters. Observing interactions, I noticed salient divisions not only between Tajik and Chinese staff, but also between Tajik workers along lines of class, gender and age, and the ways in which they related to and interacted with Chinese colleagues. I discerned an invisible line between the local labourers on the one hand, and Chinese foremen and their Tajik interpreters — male, mostly from an urban background — on the other (Hofman, 2025b). The contrast was particularly noticeable during breaks and after work: whereas the Tajik labourers paused for lunch next to the field or at home, the Chinese staff and their Tajik interpreters went to the local company compound for lunch and often also stayed there overnight. Where interpreters were also expected to monitor agricultural labourers, the division was even sharper. The interpreters I interacted with had studied in China, and some of them had an affective relation with China. As a result of this, as well as their language skills, they related to their Chinese colleagues differently from the way that rural labourers did (ibid.).

Work on Chinese farms is attractive for a part of the rural population because the pay tends to be higher than work for Tajik farmers. In order to overcome distrust and secure a workforce, the Chinese companies exploit existing social networks. However, for rural women, working for Chinese agribusinesses remains problematic. Some run the risk of being denounced simply for working there, not to speak of the possibility of becoming involved with Chinese men (Hofman, 2021b). In 2021, a news item about a fatal attack by a young Tajik woman on a Chinese farmer in the outskirts of Dushanbe went viral on social media, sparking aggressive comments which illustrate the controversial nature of Chinese–Tajik partnerships (ibid.). Discord is more pronounced in the more conservative rural areas than in urban areas, but there too, controversy remains. One of my male Chinese interlocutors who had a Tajik partner shared that he did not often go out with his Tajik wife, as he experienced discomfort with the attention they received in the public realm. In what follows, I analyse the encounters on and around the fields.

Looking to Authority

Labour, Health and Sovereign Agency: A Desire for the State

During one of my trips to the base of a Chinese agribusiness, a group of Tajik men were preparing to apply chemical substances on the cotton fields. When I passed by with a Tajik assistant, and inquired about their work, the men complained about the dangerous working conditions. 'The poor man, sister (*apa*), doesn't have any gloves, not any protective clothing In the Soviet era, these substances became banned'. I asked: 'Have [the Chinese] provided any explanation?'. 'Ah, the Chinese. [Whether you want or not], when the wind warms up, it will take the substance along, and it will diffuse'. When I inquired about a company translator, my companion stated: 'The translator, Ms Irna, (s/he) stretched the legs, ... sleeping in the office'. One of the labourers expressed gratitude that someone from the authorities had passed by to check in on them:⁸ 'I almost burst out of my pants out of happiness [*Ana khursand shudem dar kurtam nameghunjam odamho az hukumat moro nazorat karda istodaand*]'.⁹

In the conversation that ensued, one of the men reflected on the Soviet past, that in his eyes was less austere than the present. The Soviet state provided better working conditions and, in the memory of these men, employment was a given. There was relative stability. By contrast, today, households have to make ends meet themselves, and (decent) employment can no longer be taken for granted. One of the men said that protesting is futile; high unemployment rates mean that the Chinese can easily find other workers. By addressing us personally, assuming we represented the state, the men appealed to our 'moral compass' (Verheul, 2021: 93) and individualized the state's responsibility and accountability. They wanted the state to act. When we left, my companion remarked: 'You see, Ms Irna. The Chinese are [harming] people'.

I recorded similar concerns and disgruntlement in several other conversations, but public protests are rarely seen in Tajikistan. However, a year prior to this encounter, a group of women in another locality had taken public action. As recalled by two men from their locality,¹⁰ the women had approached their district authorities after they experienced reproductive health issues, which they felt were connected to their work on the Chinese-run cotton fields. The women did not question the arduous nature of cotton labour in itself, but rather the exposure to agrochemicals (see also Hofman

8. The men assumed we represented the state, presumably because of the car (a white Lada Niva) that I was driving.

9. Meeting with a group of male labourers, 23 April 2020.

10. Meeting, 1 October 2020.

2025a).¹¹ They appealed to the district authorities in the hope that the state would intervene. Reportedly, the women had found their concerns unheard: a local elite, whose lands were involved, had intervened, downplaying concerns. The women had subsequently decided to discontinue their work.

These vignettes exhibit a desire for stateness: a hope in, or for, the state (see Jansen, 2014, in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina). The appeals by the men and women labourers show ‘how embedded subjects themselves see (but also imagine ... invoke ... and reify) the “state”’ (Reeves, 2014: 13). The desire for state attention speaks to Doolot and Heathershaw’s (2015: 103) observations in Kyrgyzstan, where people longed for and invoked the state ‘in perceptions of its absence’ (see Bryant and Reeves, 2021: 12). Thus, while I regularly observed and recorded resentment about the state during fieldwork, as people expressed their opinion that officials were corrupt, and that the state functions to the benefit of private individuals, these women and men expressed a desire for the state, or what could be called an expression of sovereign agency. As Bryant and Reeves (2021: 1) note, this desire ‘often emerges from a sense of loss — of political voice, of political legibility, of political order — and a yearning to regain it’. Yet these micropolitics did not materialize in changes in state practice, at least not in significant ways.

Labour and Gendered Forms of Contention

As noted, public protests — particularly led by women, such as the case described above — are exceptional in rural Tajikistan. Women who challenge male authority risk being socially sanctioned, with repercussions beyond the individual. Practices and discourses shape and sustain the markers of feminine virtue in Tajikistan, ‘and work as the “family face” and honour of related men’ (Boboyorov, 2013: 95). However, in the absence of such social controls, and with little fear of being publicly dishonoured or losing social capital, women face fewer repercussions when protesting against Chinese employers, and are sometimes also supported by men in these protests.

While the women in the above case turned to the state, I observed a more spontaneous, silent protest by women in another locality in 2020. Sometime in early summer, the women decided to stop working for their Chinese employer, as it did not provide a decent place for lunch and work breaks, and wages had fallen. One woman from my host family, my host sister, was involved. One evening, she explained the women’s concerns: ‘Only if they construct a place for lunch and rest with shade, and if the payment is raised, we will go again. Our yoghurt [brought for consumption] boils at 10 o’clock

11. Concerns about women’s reproductive health garnered support among men, and not only here: I recorded similar support in two other instances as well. Tajikistan’s environmental regulations are loose and enforcement is lax. There is little public information about Chinese companies’ input use, which feeds concerns (Hofman, 2025a).

in the morning, what should we eat until 5 pm?’ (Hofman, 2021b). The women did not invoke health issues or the law, but rather articulated that the Chinese company was violating the moral economy, in which case they had no recourse to the state. As negotiations were also considered impossible, the women collectively decided to stay away for some time (*ibid*). The Chinese employer had thus opened up space for new forms of contentious politics. This might also happen in encounters with other foreign companies: I once met some Tajik male farmers who conveyed disappointment about the way a British company treated them, and I also heard of protests by farmers in Tajikistan’s northern Sughd region related to premium payments they expected from a company with foreign involvement.¹² However, Chinese companies are unique in this part of Tajikistan, as noted earlier, and even more so in terms of the involvement of women labourers. I observed that the decision made by the women had an effect on their collective identity, and their attitudes towards the Chinese company contrasted with the way that women tend to relate to and engage with local farmers. As Boboyorov (2013: 95) notes: ‘If they do not work for their households, including for cotton-growing farms, women are publicly dishonoured and stigmatised’.

The Chinese presence occasionally also triggers tensions at community and household level, where women bargain and require permission from their spouse — and often their in-laws — to work in the public realm (Hofman, 2021b). In the summer of 2020, around the time of the strike described above, a conflict arose within the small community I lived in, involving the same small group of women, including my host sister. The women had observed inconsistencies in their wages. At one point, the women collectively approached the Tajik male supervisor of their production unit. It was discovered that the leader of the women’s production unit had withheld part of the women’s pay for several months. In talking about it one evening, the husband of my host sister joked: they finally understood how the leader had been able to buy a number of cows and renovate her house. Given that the Chinese companies rely on social networks for the recruitment of labour, people cannot resort to the state when internal conflicts arise. The women also felt unable to report back to the Chinese employer themselves and had therefore turned to a male manager who conveyed their concerns to the Chinese management. Eventually, the production leader was fired. Thus, depending on the locus of friction, people look to the state or to non-state figures of authority, or they express discontent in another way.

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12. In an interview (9 December 2020), lawyers working at a regional (Central Asian) law firm shared that they were recording increasing numbers of labour disputes between Tajik individuals and foreign companies and organizations in Dushanbe. According to the lawyers, the more highly educated segments of the (urban) population are increasingly assertive in their relationships with foreign employers, and are more likely to sue foreign employers as they consider the chance of success higher than when suing domestic employers. This resonates with my observations in rural areas as analysed in this article: questioning Chinese companies’ practices is less politically laden than challenging Tajik actors’ operations.

Questioning Authority

In contrast, the Chinese presence can also offer people a new vantage point to reflect on the status quo and evaluate domestic power configurations. Here, I provide two vignettes which both reveal that interactions with Chinese companies may provide a new frame of reference, inducing contrasting reflections on relations of authority. They illustrate that encounters with Chinese companies can heighten consciousness of injustice or unfairness.

Cotton Procurement

Tajikistan's cotton economy has undergone various reforms since 1991 (Hofman, 2017). Officially, the sector has been liberalized. However, in reality, elite-run ginneries enjoy monopsony power and state control remains pervasive. Many farmers in Tajikistan's lowlands are still expected to plant cotton, sometimes on up to 60 per cent of their land, alongside various politically less important crops (Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev, 2017; Hofman, 2021c). Some farmers invest their social, political and/or financial capital to challenge or negotiate production plans, but completely ignoring the pressure to plant cotton can impact one's security of tenure: in Tajikistan the state owns the land, and authorities can revoke land use rights. Moreover, in many localities farmers are expected to deliver their cotton to specific ginneries; this is partly because ruling elites have a private interest in the ginneries, but also because locally ginned cotton contributes to district-level tax revenues. Whilst the district borders are always policed, during the cotton harvest the transport of cotton is especially closely monitored. Thus, Chinese companies operate in a highly politicized environment. At the same time, the fact that many farmers are forced to produce cotton provides ample opportunities for the Chinese companies to source cotton.

Some years after their arrival, the Chinese agribusinesses, particularly the SOE referred to above, started sourcing cotton from Tajik farmers across districts in the southwestern Khatlon region. Tajik farmers welcomed this interest: the Chinese paid relatively high prices, in dollars, and paid on the spot, whereas ginneries owned by domestic elites pay in Tajik somoni, and sometimes with a substantial delay. With higher prices and better conditions, the Chinese offered an attractive outlet for farmers, and local (elite) gin owners, many of whom used to enjoy monopsony power, saw their profits dwindling. In response, as I describe elsewhere (Hofman, 2025a), some gin owners intervened to prevent sales between the Chinese and local farmers.

Reflecting on that difference in treatment, some farmers shared their experiences, recalling the high prices the Chinese offered in earlier years.

The positive terms of trade contrasted starkly with the ways in which domestic companies have always dealt with farmers. One farmer even stated: ‘the Chinese eat donkeys, they eat snakes, they eat dogs. But they leave human rights untouched [*onho haqqi mardum namekhurand*]’.¹³ While ginneries and various state officials claim that farmgate prices of cotton in Tajikistan closely follow world market dynamics, many farmers believe that farmgate prices are manipulated, and that cotton merely fills the pockets of elites (Hofman, 2021c). Their experiences with the Chinese company, happening in the interstices of state and elite control, confirmed their long-held assumption that Tajik gin owners were not trustworthy. In a somewhat similar vein, the experiences of some labourers triggered reflections on domestic labour relations, as the second vignette describes.

Contracting Labour

In October 2020, a month before she was fired for withholding a portion of the women labourers’ wages, I met the woman leader of the women’s production unit mentioned above. I had approached her to learn more about employment conditions and the ways in which she had climbed the ladder. While the embezzlement of money casts the statements below in a somewhat different light, her comparison of Chinese with local employers still holds.

On a visit to her home, the woman told me about her labour history, how she had become production leader at the company, and her experiences with her employer. The Chinese, she claimed, treated labourers better than local farmers did. When I asked about the difference, she responded: ‘What the difference is? Tajik farmers provide lunch, but they sometimes tell you: “I pay out [in cash] tomorrow”. The Chinese, they do not provide lunch, but they pay out every *tin*. If only 10 *diram*; they pay 10 *diram*.¹⁴ They do not cheat, they do not lie’.¹⁵ While talking to me, she collected a pile of documents. She insisted on going through all the pages. The documents included her own labour contract and the register that she had to fill out during workdays, with the names of the workers, the work hours, and everyone’s signature.

Even though form might take precedence over content, and the contract could easily be overturned, the way in which she talked about it conveyed the value of the document for her self-esteem: the contract affirmed her status and responsibility as brigade leader. It reminded me of a conversation I had in the summer of 2019 with an agronomist who was employed by a British company in another part of Tajikistan. He also valued his contract highly:

13. Interview, farmer, 21 September 2020.

14. The word *tin* was used in the Soviet era for 0.01 ruble, here used as a synonym for *diram*, which equals 0.01 somoni.

15. Interview, woman leader production unit, 5 October 2020.

‘It is the first time in my life I work under a formal contract!’. Yet in my interactions with other people in the vicinity of the woman brigade leader, I noticed that her leadership was met with ambivalence. Initially, some neighbours admired her, but others condemned her behaviour and stigmatized her, as she was challenging gender norms. The woman’s status changed radically after the revelation of the embezzlement.

In some ways, then, interactions with Chinese companies set domestic labour relations in perspective. The Chinese companies’ operations affect and are themselves also shaped by domestic power hierarchies and politics. As in other contexts, ‘racial constructions, moral economy and labour market struggles’ (Lee, 2022: 321) shape the encounters between Tajik and Chinese actors and the Chinese presence more generally. How do officials act in such a setting? This is discussed next.

Representing the State: Hyper-Following the Law

Bureaucrats in Tajikistan’s southwestern Khatlon region do not often interact with foreigners. As mentioned, there are few foreign companies in operation, and the foreign donor organizations active in the region often coordinate their work from the capital city, Dushanbe. The arrival of Chinese companies signalled a change. Chinese agribusinesses partner with national as well as subnational elites; local and district-level bureaucrats are supposed to facilitate the Chinese projects, but they are also expected to represent the state and showcase responsiveness to citizens’ concerns. Interactions with Chinese, and other foreign, actors offer an opportunity to embody the state.

In 2020, I met frequently with state officials who encountered Chinese agribusinesses operating in their locality. During one of my first visits, in July 2020, I wanted to get an impression of the situation in land use patterns, and asked a staff member of one of the district-level authorities: ‘What is the situation like today in this district? Is farmland fragmentation still going on?’. He replied: ‘Before, there was a lot of unused land. But then the Chinese [company] came’.¹⁶ As he spoke, he lifted a large folder from his desk, with the name of the Chinese company written on the front; he did not tell me what was inside. I tried not to show too much curiosity, and returned to the issue only during my next visit. ‘How long have [the Chinese] been here, how long will they stay?’, I asked. ‘Perhaps one year, perhaps two, five, ten’, he replied. I expressed surprise, and asked: ‘I assume all details are in the folder that you showed last time?’. He replied: ‘No, that folder [only] relates to a penalty [*jarima*]’. He went on to explain that the Chinese agribusiness, upon acquisition of the old ginnery, had planned to expand the ginning capacity and construct additional buildings. ‘They did not wait

16. Interview, state official, 24 July 2020.

for the final approval. You know, things take time here'. He explained that the bureaucracy has become more complex in recent years. 'Before, you submitted one letter, maybe two, and then it was done. Nowadays you need to submit a pile of papers'.¹⁷ One needs bureaucratic capital, or other forms of capital that can be converted into bureaucratic capital, to expedite a process — something I also experienced myself in the field.

According to the official, the Chinese company had not waited for the necessary approval, and so had violated law. In a subsequent meeting, the official told me the company was fined. The penalty imposed on the Chinese company amounted to 11,600 Tajik somoni (approximately US\$ 1,000 in summer 2020). And, he said, with an ironic smile on his face: 'The Chinese paid in one second [*yak sekunda*]. Local people are already troubled when they get a 100 somoni fine'. He said it would be used for public purposes, 'payment of pensions'. When I returned another time, I asked him to clarify how fines are assessed. Although I was aware of the very detailed Code on Administrative Offences as well as the Land Code and the Law on *Dehqon* Farms of the Republic of Tajikistan, I had difficulty grasping the way in which local officials enforced these laws. In response to my queries the man sighed and replied: 'It depends on the total number of indicators. We have the Code on Administrative Offences, remember. One indicator is 58 somoni. Violating the rules can be three to five indicators, or five to ten, etcetera'¹⁸ (also quoted in Hofman, 2025a).

The official had enforced the law to the letter. While we could dismiss his behaviour as performative and assume he invoked state law for personal gain (Reeves, 2014: 12), we could also analyse it more productively: the official was 'hyper-following' the law.¹⁹ The Chinese company's operations offered a spur to perform authority: if not before the Chinese company, then at least in front of me. He was acting, as he might assume I expected him to, as a 'principled agent' (O'Brien and Li, 1999), in conformity with Tajikistan's government attempts to present the Tajik state as a state which follows the rule of law.²⁰

Studies on the activities of Chinese actors in other jurisdictions have pointed to similar dynamics (Wang, 2023). As De Waal (2015: 208) noted: '[g]overnmental institutions are hidebound and bureaucrats are skilled at subverting political decisions through procrastination, sabotage or — that most effective of bureaucratic measures — strict working to rule'. Indeed, when unaffected by localized power plays, state officials might be able to enforce the law to the letter — something they are mandated to do, after all. As noted above, the Central Asian state is often characterized as personal

17. Interview, state official, 17 August 2020.

18. Interview, state official, 22 September 2020.

19. I thank Kramer Gillin for suggesting this notion.

20. In one of our last meetings the official shared that the Chinese had appealed to officials at the national level. As a result, I do not know if the penalty was eventually levied or annulled.

and informal (Heathershaw, 2011; Reeves, 2014). The formal face of the state, expressed by officials performing ‘frontstage behavior’ (Goffman, 1959: 174), is easier to maintain in front of foreigners where enforcement of law is less bound by ethical dilemmas, clientelism or power plays directly involving Tajik actors. While Chinese companies partner with local elites, often have juridical advisors on their staff, and sometimes seek advice from law firms (Hofman, 2025a), the violation of relatively minor rules opens up space for bureaucrats to enforce the law and express an act of tactical sovereignty (Hetherington, 2020), which can oppose the interests of the ruling regime. As Hetherington (*ibid.*: 141) notes, in his insightful work on Paraguay where bureaucrats sought to curb the soy industry but struggled with regulatory capture, ‘the ruler’s body is not the only body through which sovereignty operates. This is true even at the most mundane level of the activist bureaucrat, whose interpretation of the law depends on her being by that road, physically present with the clipboard and pen’. As such, ‘Global China’ localizes in various ways, triggering multiple, contradictory responses and perceptions, with regard both to China and to the state, and other figures of authority.

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed the ways in which encounters with Chinese agribusinesses inform interactions between Tajik actors. They prompt people to think about their relationship with authority: the authority of the state, of businesses, local elites, and of individuals at the village level. A study of these encounters provides a unique lens through which to examine the state, that is, the ideas, practices and perceptions of and around the state.

Trajectories of social change are mediated and (co)produced by various dynamics which are located and play out in various places and at different times. China’s impact overseas unfolds in interaction with other foreign as well as domestic actors and dynamics. The spaces Chinese companies enter and the landscapes they cultivate are inhabited. Examining what happens in and around these spaces, I have highlighted three dynamics: how the Chinese presence prompts people to turn to authority and to reflect on authority, and how it compels or enables individuals (officials) to exercise the power of the state.

This article contributes to and bridges the literature on critical geopolitics, Global China and the anthropology of the state in various ways. First, I grounded Global China (Lee, 2022) by providing unique insights into the dynamics revolving around Chinese companies in rural Tajikistan, and situated these dynamics in the context of an authoritarian, post-conflict setting. These insights illustrate the contrasting and ambiguous ways in which Chinese actors are perceived and responded to, and the ways in which Chinese companies become enmeshed in as well as affect local

power, labour and land struggles. Indeed, Chinese actors entering Tajikistan do not operate in a vacuum.

Second, I addressed how encounters with a foreign other affect notions of citizenship and prompt a reflection on relations of authority, in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, encounters on and around the farm fields triggered expressions of what, in labourers' eyes, makes a good state; they produced a reification of the state. Thus, while Bryant (2024: 395) questions whether citizenship is (still) the right rubric for discussing political rights and inclusion, the cases studied in this article demonstrate that people identified with and looked to the Tajik state in their encounters with a foreign other. The Chinese presence elicited expressions of sovereign agency, which is 'an aspiration for forms of institutional recognition and political legibility that enable efficacious action' (Bryant and Reeves, 2021: 1). However, the 'sovereignty effect', which 'occurs at the moment where the state appears as "ours"' (ibid.: 12), remained largely absent. On the other hand, interactions with Chinese employers shaped or confirmed narratives and discourses about injustice and exploitation by local figures of authority, outside the realm of state control; perceptions which the state and elites have sought to rebuff.

Finally, the article sheds light on a bureaucratic response: by 'hyper-following' the law, officials employ an act of sovereignty. Encounters with Chinese companies can offer state officials an opportunity to exercise the power of the state, using the law to signal a power relation. As Reeves (2014: 174) notes: 'the sovereignty of the state is continuously reenacted through the creation of legal and political "outsides"'. The interactions with Chinese agribusiness are 'processes through which certain people, actions, places, and objects come to be invested with state-like authority' (ibid.: 173).

My analysis has articulated the importance of including lived experiences for understanding grand and geopolitical imaginaries, in this case that of Global China. Indeed, 'struggles over *jurisdiction* [sic] [happen] in the spaces of everyday living' (Davis, 2020: 35). The Chinese-run cotton fields and company compounds are 'sites for the reproduction and contestation of geopolitical imaginaries and possibilities' (Carter and Woodyer, 2020: 1047). Simultaneously, the analysis of dynamics revolving around Chinese companies offers an instructive lens to unpack and study the state in the everyday, which an examination of interactions between domestic actors may not expose. To quote Smith (2012) who wrote about intimate, embodied experiences of geopolitics in Ladakh, the Chinese-run farm fields, '*are territory but also make territory*' (Smith, 2012: 1511, emphasis in original). In the interstices of state order, state ideas and expectations alter and take shape. Most of the dynamics and expressions discussed in this article remained confined to discursive shifts; they have not unsettled established hegemonies or significantly affected state practice. This might be because they were scattered, relatively limited and mostly silent, taking place in a

highly repressive context, as well as because of the contrasts inherent in these expressions and attitudes towards the state.

Contradictions lie at the core of perceptions of what the state is, and should do, in Tajikistan. My analysis of the Chinese presence reveals this inconsistency. It is in interactions with the foreign other that expectations and desires for a specific state surface. People turned to the (imagined) state to demand justice, rights and inclusion. As such, their lived experiences triggered the articulation of belonging, the desire to belong.

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