

Seeds of empire or seeds of friendship? The politics of the diffusion of Chinese crop seeds in Tajikistan

Guest Lecture by Dr Irna Hofman (University of Oxford)

Farm fields have always been political domains. Which seed variety is planted, when and how, are political decisions, and who controls seed, gains partial control over agricultural production. Rural Central Asia has experienced a growing presence of Chinese actors and supplies of Chinese farm inputs in recent years, which fire up the Belt and Road Initiative. These dynamics reflect China's nascent role in the global food regime. However, these developments do not go uncontested. Based on intermittent periods of long-term ethnographic research (2012-2021), I examine the politics of the diffusion of Chinese crop seeds in Tajikistan. Tajik farmers experience China's growing presence in their seed market in various ways. Apart from the rich assortment of Chinese farm inputs in local agro-shops, this includes quotidian encounters with Chinese entrepreneurs who consider Tajikistan a seed frontier. Indeed, Tajikistan is a microcosm where rivalries in the global seed market play out on the farm level. I analyse the modalities of the diffusion of seeds, shed light on the varied perceptions and encounters, and reveal the indispensable yet ambivalent role of Tajik actors in the spread of Chinese seeds in Tajikistan. Agricultural knowledge is socially embedded, and seeds do not travel on their own.

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