In recent years, China’s rapid economic growth has been coupled with a rising demand for natural resources. Great international concern has arisen over China’s land acquisitions for agricultural and biofuel production, pejoratively called “land grabbing”. Contrarily, when looking at China’s land acquisitions in a global context, it is not that much different from land acquisitions by other countries and corporate players. In this sense, there are various parallels and differences between the governance of Chinese “land grabbing” versus a “globalization with Chinese characteristics”.

Securitisation of food availability? Safeguarding domestic food supplies is presumed to be one of the core motives underlying China’s foreign land investments, therewith infringing upon food security of vulnerable livelihoods in recipients. The research aims to first scrutinize and re-examine the land acquisitions on the ground? And how are customary (ethnic) communities? What stakeholders are involved, and importantly the actual impact of Chinese land acquisitions at the grassroots. In particular, China’s upcoming presence in Central Asia – a strategically important region with vital geo-political implications because of its natural resources that the Central Asian state have to offer, as the Chinese government is increasingly active to foster trade and bilateral relationships with the Central Asian states. This is also given in the importance of the region for the United Nations Autonomous Region. The region is an important bridge between Tajikistan and China, and social stability in the region is of utmost importance for the Chinese government. From this description alone, one may understand that there are potentially various motives that underlie Chinese land-based investments.

Concluding remarks
When analyzing China’s developing “going global” strategy on the world map, we found a significant relative increase of investments that are increasingly located further overseas. Investments in Southeast Asia have consistently occurred over the last decade, while many Chinese investments in African countries have taken place in the last two years. Recently China’s acquisitions for agricultural land have also been taking place in South America.

At the same time, however, the lacuna in precise data and information about Chinese companies’ structure, size and government backing constrains a better and detailed overview of the investments based on Chinese foreign land acquisitions. The diversity of Chinese investments involves multiple Chinese actors which may have distinct interests to operate overseas and expand their economic horizons. The fact that Chinese companies acquire land, differ widely in socio-economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions, as do the particular resources that Chinese companies aim at, makes it challenging to draw generalizations which influence the way Chinese companies approach the host society.

While it remains difficult to present a more complete picture than the hitherto speculative publications and anecdotal information, our research project aims to review the Chinese global activities in agriculture in a more comprehensive manner, lacking in data and information about the engagement of Chinese private company overseas limits exact quantification, and a reliable qualification of the Chinese projects. Several studies have been conducted on China’s expansion in resource extractive industries and other sectors. Yet, China’s global expansion in general is still poorly understood. In this respect, our research does not set out to solve the riddles or conclusions, but aims to first scrutinize and re-examine the current discourse of what many call China’s “land grabs”.

This study is embedded in the larger China-GX (China’s Global Expansion) research consortium, hosted by the Modern East Asian Research Centre (MERC, www.merc.eu). The China-GX research consortium will look at China’s Asian expansion in terms of its influence on a wide range of issues: land investments, deforestation, the trade in protected animals and plants, energy and dam building, mineral exploitation, and new modes of knowledge production.

Rethinking China’s ‘land grabs’: Chinese land investments in Central Asia

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IT IS AGAIN THE BACKDROP ABOVE, that our research on Chinese land acquisitions is taking place. The research aims to arrive at an analytical framework with which one might better understand the processes of Chinese worldwide land acquisitions.

China going global
For one thing, the significant rise in China’s global activities in agriculture with particular reference to its alleged “land grabbing” should not be seen as separate from the country’s global expansion in other sectors. Instead of “land grabbing” we prefer to use the more neutral term “land acquisition”. The activities may intervene, for interests and preferences often align with governmental priorities. Chinese companies are involved in infrastructure projects, mining and oil extraction around the world, while smaller-scale private Chinese enterprises increasingly engage in large-scale overseas investment and production activities too. The particular pace of Chinese investments in the last decade follows the state’s “going global” strategy, deemed crucial for national development by the central authorities.

Over the past decades China’s sustained economic growth has put a rising pressure on the country’s domestic natural resources. The oft-cited numbers portraying the country’s dire situation are that China boasts 21% of the world’s population, while the country possesses only 8.5% of the world’s available arable land, and 6.6% to 7.6% of the world’s water reserves. To complicate matters, China lost 8.2 million hectares of arable land between 1997 and 2010, due to urbanization and environmental degradation (UNOCHR 2010).

The pressure on the country’s land and water resources is unuestionable. It is manifested in the different strategies that the authorities undertake to increase domestic food production. For the government, affordable food prices are perceived as being crucial to maintain social stability and guaranteed supplies are of utmost importance. To fuel its economic development, China increasingly projects its domestic shortages to other countries and regions abroad. The stimulus for this development has become even more pressing since the country’s growing middle class pursues more luxurious lifestyles and consumption. An increase in a range of particular food products, such as coffee, cane, wine, but also animal feed, are more efficiently produced overseas, and thus imply new grounds for Chinese land-based investments.

In the past five years, the country has become a major player in global land market. New unexpected agreements have emerged under which the Chinese government seeks to acquire large tracts of land and to access overseas resources.

“Land grabbing” or land acquisition?
Global land acquisitions are high on the socio-political agenda today. The recent developments have resulted in numerous research initiatives and reports in the last five years, with fierce debates about the impacts of the investments on local livelihoods and the environment. A frequently mentioned issue by critics is the destruction of cultural landscapes, through which the land use changes are implemented are undermocratic and a testimony of “bad land governance”.

There are several issues at stake here. For one thing, what “land grabbing” denotes is downright ill-defined. The term “land grabbing” denotes it’s ill-definition and ownership. However, the recent land acquisitions regularly contain formally arranged lease or concessionary rights, ranging from 30 to 99 years. Due to shortages in food, interest in overseas rapidly emerging economies have become to outsource agricultural production by leasing or buying rural land in developing and developed countries. Assessing whether these land acquisitions are entirely negative for poor and socially vulnerable groups, or whether they might also bring positive effects for local communities, is the aim of our research.

The available information about Chinese land acquisitions is strongly determined by civic and non-governmental policies. For instance, an alarmist report by the NGO Grain in 2008 has identified approximately 3000 farmland-related land investments by Chinese investors up to 2008. Grain concluded that considering the total number of 100 identified international land deals by various investors worldwide, China could be labelled a major investor.

In a next step, in-depth fieldwork will be undertaken, for which the China-GX research consortium will look at China’s Asian expansion in general is still poorly understood. In this respect, our research does not set out to solve the riddles or conclusions, but aims to first scrutinize and re-examine the current discourse of what many call China’s “land grabs”.

References

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The China-GX consortium and their partners see themselves as critically and constructively working on a comprehensive review of Chinese land acquisitions worldwide, entitled “Revisiting China’s “Land Grab” Discourse” which is expected for publication in early 2012.

The very fact that these large investments concur with China’s aid projects in Africa makes that different appearances and ideas about “China’s drives” intermingle. Clear is that China’s neo-colonial image does not entirely characterize the transnational Chinese investments in Africa. This came to the fore plainly last July (2011), when a German governmental official admitted China for having caused the current famine in the Horn of Africa (Szent-Ivany, 2011). Chinese officials have strongly contested this assault, and emphasised that Chinese teams working in Africa simply seek to enhance food security on the continent. The recently established agricultural training centres operated by Chinese teams are considered to support African countries in their secularisation of food supplies and interestingly, these recent projects mirror China’s development aid projects in Africa in the early 1960s. How China’s expansion affects land availability and food security of local communities is an essential point for further field research.

Filling the void
Yet, in fact we know very little about the range of Chinese investments involved, the motives behind their investments, and importantly the actual impact of Chinese land acquisitions at the grassroots. In particular, China’s emergence as an important player in the global food market has become even more pressing since the country’s growing middle class pursues more luxurious lifestyles and consumption. China’s expansion in general is still poorly understood. In this respect, our research does not set out to solve the riddles or conclusions, but aims to first scrutinize and re-examine the current discourse of what many call China’s “land grabs”.

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