


## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Between Discourse and Field: The Socio-Environmental Impacts of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in Indonesia's Palm Oil Sector

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## ABSTRACT

Indonesia's palm oil industry, the world's largest supplier, faces significant scrutiny because of its severe environmental and social impacts. The expansion of Chinese companies in this sector has raised concerns about exacerbating existing problems. This study examines the case of Jade (pseudonym), a Chinese-owned palm oil company, to assess the socio-environmental consequences of Chinese investments in Indonesia. Employing a dual methodology combining an analysis of public discourse with primary field data, the research reveals the complexity and contradictions within Chinese, global and local perspectives on the company's operations, highlighting a collision of priorities: Economic growth, environmental protection and governance reform. At the field site, unresolved land disputes and weak governance have created a fragile balance between local resistance and the company's partial compromises. Although Chinese companies are often perceived as autonomous entities advancing national interests, this study underscores how their activities are deeply embedded in Indonesia's political, historical and cultural contexts, exposing them to systemic challenges in the palm oil sector. The study also critiques the 'global ecological civilisation' concept, arguing that China's non-interference stance, by avoiding engagement with entrenched local conflicts, risks undermining efforts to achieve meaningful socio-environmental progress.

## 1 | Introduction

Palm oil, a versatile and widely used vegetable oil, is a key ingredient in a substantial portion of packaged items found on supermarket shelves, ranging from food products like pizza and chocolate to personal care items such as deodorant and shampoo. Despite its extensive applications, the palm oil industry faces significant socio-environmental challenges, notably extensive deforestation—particularly in peat swamp forests crucial for endangered species and vital ecosystems—excessive use of pesticides and fires, unfair treatment of workers and violation

of the rights of local communities (Human Rights Watch 2019; Varkkey 2021). These critical issues have ignited extensive discussions on the socio-environmental impacts associated with palm oil production, resonating in both broader society and academic circles.

Despite the existing knowledge, the understanding of the role of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI), a latecomer yet increasingly influential in the realm of global FDI, remains limited. Although there is a growing body of literature on the green Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's 'going out' activities,

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driven by the country's expanding overseas ventures, significant gaps persist. China's investments have predominantly focused on energy and infrastructure sectors, receiving more scholarly attention, whereas soft commodities like palm oil have been relatively overlooked, despite their significant environmental and social impacts (World Economic Forum 2022). Existing research tends to prioritise broad-scale impacts, meaning that limited attention has been devoted to the on-the-ground operations of specific projects. The broad-based approach, however, inadequately captures the complexities and nuanced impacts of individual projects, underscoring the need for a more grounded approach to understanding China's overseas operations (Lee 2022).

In response to this call, our study employs a project-based approach to unravel the complexities involved in understanding the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investment in the palm oil sector. We focus our investigation on Indonesia, a nation contributing to almost half of the global palm oil production (Shigetomi et al. 2020), with roughly two-thirds of the output earmarked for export (Rothrock and Weatherer 2020). As the world's largest supplier, Indonesia has been at the forefront of controversies surrounding palm oil production, with persistent debates about the socio-environmental implications of this critical industry (Human Rights Watch 2019). This situation is further complicated by the active participation of global major powers in this export-oriented sector, engaging in both importing and making direct investments in production.

China, currently the second-largest global palm oil importer, is poised to surpass India in becoming the primary destination for Indonesian palm oil (CDP 2020; IndexMundi 2022). China's rising palm oil imports, coupled with Europe's waning interest because of sustainability concerns, are reshaping global trade dynamics (Anggoro and Rabindra 2021). Concurrently, Chinese companies have strategically expanded their direct investments in Indonesia by establishing palm oil plantations. A comparative analysis underscores the significant surge in Chinese FDI in Indonesia's palm oil sector, notably when contrasting the pre-BRI years (before 2013) with the subsequent period (Fitriani 2021). This strategic manoeuvre aims to mitigate dependency concerns, ensure food security and enhance control over international pricing. As this trend continues to rise, it becomes increasingly imperative to understand how this new player is intertwined in the contentious realm of Indonesia's palm oil production.

Examining the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments in Indonesia surpasses mere isolated concerns, engaging with broader strands of discussions. First, China's overseas activities have drawn significant criticisms from the international community. However, these critiques often overlook the realities of China's on-the-ground operations and fail to capture the nuances distinguishing companies with Chinese backgrounds from other international actors. From this perspective, our study seeks to bridge the gap between these broad criticisms and the practical realities of Chinese investments in Indonesia. By conducting a comprehensive examination of both global discourse and fieldwork centred on a specific project, we aim to uncover the gaps between perception and practice, shedding light on the multi-faceted dynamics at play. Second, as China's overseas activities expand, its concept of 'global ecological civilisation' has

gained increasing attention (Geng and Lo 2023). This ideology advocates for harmonious development that balances economic progress with environmental protection. Such discussions are closely linked to questions of environmental justice within the BRI, particularly concerning how the benefits and burdens of these investments are distributed and whether the rights and interests of local communities are sufficiently protected. In the context of Indonesia's palm oil sector, which is entangled with deforestation and land rights conflicts, these concerns take on added urgency. By exploring the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments in Indonesia through these lenses, our study aims to reflect on the effectiveness of 'global ecological civilisation' in promoting sustainable outcomes.

## 2 | The Context

### 2.1 | Chinese Investments' Socio-Environmental Impacts

As China's business operations expand rapidly overseas—particularly through initiatives such as the BRI—their socio-environmental impacts have drawn increasing scrutiny, often accompanied by criticism in western media and policy commentaries. Allegations range from the exploitation of African resources to a failure to adhere to European environmental standards (Wang and Zadek 2016; Wang and Hu 2017). In response, the Chinese government frequently defends its approach, arguing that such concerns are not unique to Chinese firms but also apply to multinational corporations from developed countries. Despite these public discourse arguments, systematic reviews of the academic literature reveal significant gaps: Many studies conflate challenges common to all FDI with those distinct to Chinese companies (Wang and Zadek 2016). This conflation obscures important distinctions, leaving critical questions unresolved: How do Chinese investment practices differ from those of other nations, and what specific socio-environmental implications arise from these differences?

A core concept for addressing these questions is China's 'non-interference' principle, a foundational element of its foreign policy that shapes its overseas business practices. This principle advocates for minimal regulations and limited imposition of standards, allowing host countries to define their own regulatory frameworks including those governing socio-environmental aspects (Wang and Zadek 2016). Specific to environmentalism, the concept of 'global ecological civilisation' further illuminates China's approach. Initially developed as a domestic policy framework in China, 'ecological civilisation' has evolved into a global vision for environmentally conscious development (Hansen et al. 2018). Shaped by China's non-interference stance, the international version of ecological civilisation avoids the strong state intervention seen in China's domestic policies. Instead, it promotes market-driven environmentalism, emphasising voluntary corporate actions like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and adherence to industry standards over stringent regulatory enforcement (Geng and Lo 2023). In line with its domestic counterpart, the 'global ecological civilisation' prioritises economic and infrastructure development, a focus that resonates strongly in the BRI region. However, the intersection of China's non-interference principle with its prioritisation of economic

outcomes has heightened concerns about socio-environmental risks, particularly in many BRI countries where governance structures are often fragile and ill-equipped to manage these challenges.

On a more grounded level, empirical evidence suggests that Chinese companies often adopt a more flexible and ad hoc approach to sustainability, in contrast to the more formalised, long-term strategies typically associated with western firms (Yang 2019). The literature identifies two key dimensions for explaining the behaviour of Chinese overseas companies: The influence of the Chinese government and the role of host countries. Scholars focusing on China frequently examine the complex interplay between government policy and corporate actions abroad, identifying ownership structures as a critical factor. As noted in the literature, state-owned enterprises are often caught in the balance between political directives and commercial objectives (Nie 2022). In contrast, less is known about the influence on private companies, which may operate with more autonomy. Nevertheless, for both types of ownership, the extent of government control over these practices remains a point of contention among scholars (Tan-Mullins 2020).

The second key dimension is the role of host countries. Weak rule of law and lax regulatory frameworks, particularly prevalent in many BRI nations, are believed to contribute to poorer socio-environmental outcomes (Liao 2019; Coenen et al. 2021). Studies suggest that the behaviours of Chinese investments are co-constructed through the interplay of local, national and international contexts (Yang et al. 2020). However, empirical studies on the interactions between Chinese companies and their host societies remain limited. This highlights the growing need for 'grounded' research to explore how these interactions influence—and are influenced by—the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments (Lee 2022). Our study contributes to this growing body of literature by focusing on Indonesia's palm oil production, where long-standing socio-environmental conflicts provide valuable insights into these broader dynamics.

## 2.2 | Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Indonesia's Palm Oil Production

Indonesia's palm oil sector is characterised by complex and deeply entrenched conflicts, shaped by historical legacies, political dynamics and governance challenges. A prominent theme in the scholarly literature is land-related disputes, particularly land grabbing and conflicts arising from unclear land use rights (Semedi and Bakker 2014; Berenschot et al. 2022). These issues are closely linked to the coexistence of customary land tenure systems and a convoluted concession framework that often overrides traditional practices (Li and Semedi 2021). Under Indonesian land law, much of the land is treated as state-owned (Hidayanti et al. 2021), with plantation companies granted cultivation rights (*hak guna usaha* [HGU]) for specific periods. These concessions frequently overlap with customary land ownership claims, which are rooted in ancestral ties to the land. However, concessions are frequently granted without meaningful community consultation, leaving local populations uninformed and disenfranchised in the face of plantation expansion (Afrizal 2020).

This ambiguity in land ownership exacerbates local grievances, often escalating into protests when promises of compensation, infrastructure, or employment remain unfulfilled (Marti 2008). The situation is further complicated by the activities of land mafias—groups engaged in fraudulent land transactions for profit—who exploit systemic weaknesses. These mafias are often linked to political elites and large corporations, whose significant economic and political influence entrenches land disputes (Bachriadi and Aspinall 2023). This dynamic perpetuates confusion over land rights, which are critical not only to plantation operations but also to the livelihoods of local farmers.

Adding to these complexities is the structure of oil palm plantations in Indonesia, often criticised as a form of 'corporate occupation' or 'exclusionary corporate agriculture' (McCarthy 2010; Li and Semedi 2021). Large corporations dominate the industry, holding a central role in the production and management of palm oil. To address this imbalance, Indonesian law mandates the implementation of plasma schemes, which require plantation companies to allocate 20% of their land to local communities. This land, referred to as plasma, is intended for local smallholders, who are expected to benefit from the plantation company's operations through profit-sharing, skills development, or other arrangements (Zen et al. 2005). Plasma cooperatives, which are legally mandated to represent smallholders, act as intermediaries to facilitate these relationships and encourage community participation in the plantation economy.

However, despite these legal provisions, disputes frequently arise over the allocation of plasma land, profit-sharing and the role of cooperatives—issues that undermine the interests of smallholders. Despite their legal mandate to advocate for smallholders, plasma cooperatives are frequently criticised for failing to effectively represent local interests, adopting a passive role in negotiations with plantation companies (Rahayu et al. 2022). More fundamentally, many of the problems are rooted in the specific terms of plasma schemes, which interact with existing social hierarchies to produce uneven outcomes (McCarthy 2010). Without careful scheme design and equitable implementation, smallholders risk exclusion from the economic and social advantages promised by the expanding palm oil economy.

Environmental concerns further complicate the conflicts in Indonesia's palm oil sector. The extensive deforestation of Indonesia's peat swamp forests, driven by palm oil expansion, has garnered significant attention from NGOs and academics. This deforestation not only leads to forest fires caused by peat drainage but also significantly accelerates climate change by releasing vast quantities of trapped carbon (Varkkey 2021). In response to these environmental challenges, governance initiatives like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) have emerged. Established in 2004, the RSPO is an international multistakeholder organisation that requires voluntary compliance with sustainability principles, offering certification recognised in markets such as Europe (Suharto et al. 2015). However, Indonesia has resisted full adoption of international standards, instead introducing its own Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) framework in 2011. ISPO has faced criticism for its weaker standards compared with RSPO certification. For example, Greenpeace reports that 131 ISPO-certified companies each have over 100ha illegally planted in the forest estate, protected areas where cultivating palm oil plantations

is illegal (Greenpeace 2021). Despite its shortcomings, ISPO compliance is mandatory for all palm oil companies in Indonesia, whereas RSPO membership remains voluntary, enabling many large companies to operate without adhering to stricter international sustainability standards (Human Rights Watch 2021).

The literature on Chinese investments' socio-environmental implications suggests that the practices of Chinese companies are shaped by both China's non-interference approach and the specific socio-political and environmental contexts in host countries. Research on the conflicts within Indonesia's palm oil sector identifies key areas of contention, primarily centred on land ownership, plasma schemes and environmental degradation. Guided by these insights, this study seeks to understand the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments in Indonesia's contentious palm oil sector, unpacking the multi-dimensional realities and nuanced dynamics at play.

### 3 | Methods

This study specifically focuses on the case of Company Jade (pseudonym). To respect the confidentiality requested by several interviewees, we refrain from disclosing the company's name and the exact locations of its plantations. Jade is a privately owned enterprise and a leading producer and trader of palm oil in China. It was among the earliest enterprises to adopt the Chinese government's 'going out' policy, establishing plantations in Indonesia in the mid-2000s. Jade's presence in Indonesia has received high-level recognition from both the Chinese and Indonesian governments. In China, in particular, the company has been promoted as a model 'going out' private enterprise and a high-profile BRI case, frequently featured in official media and government reports.

Our investigation of the case involves two parts. The initial part involves a thorough analysis of news and articles from Chinese, Indonesian and English sources. This examines how socio-environmental impacts are portrayed in public discourse and how perceptions differ across Chinese, English (largely influenced by international NGOs) and local Indonesian sources. For confidentiality reasons, specific media reports are not disclosed. The second part entails primary data collection in Indonesia, conducted between 5 and 19 August 2022. Our Indonesia-based team conducted 29 interviews with Jade managers, employees and key stakeholders, including village heads, chairpersons of Jade-related plasma smallholder cooperatives, local parliament chairpersons and villagers. The fieldwork occurred in West Kalimantan, where Jade acquired multiple existing plantations from preceding Indonesian companies in the early 2010s. This fieldwork examines the major socio-environmental impacts arising from Jade's entry, as well as the challenges encountered.

## 4 | Jade in Public Discourse

### 4.1 | Chinese Sources

Among the Chinese sources, the company has garnered extensive coverage through both public interviews and descriptive stories across a range of outlets, including business magazines,

official newspapers and government websites, notably some high-profile, government-affiliated sources. The overarching focus is to portray the company as a role model bringing significant socioeconomic improvements to local societies through its operations in Indonesia. Various sources frequently cite large numbers of employment opportunities created. An article from *China Daily* highlights how the Jade plantations in West Kalimantan provide additional income for locals, as they can work part-time harvesting palm oil fruits while also obtaining revenue from their own farmlands. Given Jade's agricultural focus, its palm oil plantations are concentrated in rural and underdeveloped areas where local salary levels tend to be low, and infrastructure is lacking. As a result, Jade's presence has provided significant economic benefits to these communities. Furthermore, some locals who had to seek employment outside their hometowns because of the lack of opportunities were also able to return and work closer to their homes. These optimistic portrayals, however, contrast with insights gathered during fieldwork in Indonesia, where the economic impacts of Jade's operations are perceived more ambivalently. Concerns raised by local stakeholders include low wages, challenging working conditions and dissatisfaction with the outcomes of plasma land schemes. Such complexities, integral to local experiences, are notably absent from the narratives promoted in Chinese sources.

Another recurring theme in Chinese narratives is Jade's use of the 'cooperative planting model', described as a collaborative initiative with local farmers. According to these accounts, Jade provides seeds and technology, whereas farmers secure financial support through bank loans. After each harvest, Jade purchases the produce, enabling farmers to repay their loans and retain a portion of the income. This model is often portrayed as pivotal in gaining local support for Jade's operations. Yet this portrayal does not adequately address the regulatory context or the lived experiences of local communities. The 'cooperative planting model' is in fact consistent with the plasma scheme mandated by Indonesian plantation law, rather than being a unique initiative of Jade. Furthermore, interactions between plantation companies and local communities are often marked by differing priorities and perspectives, with issues such as land use rights and profit-sharing frequently cited as sources of tension. These dynamics will be explored in greater detail in subsequent sections.

Another facet of Jade's socio-environmental impacts that has been extensively covered in Chinese reports is its CSR contributions, manifested mainly through investments in infrastructure and social services. According to public interviews with Jade's management, the company's initial internal, high-level discussions, following the decision to expand overseas, revolved around creating an infrastructure plan for the proposed Indonesian plantation. This plan included considerations for building a mosque, church, primary school and hospital. The rationale behind such planning was rooted in the recognition that overseas land resource development is highly risky and sensitive, necessitating support from local governments, religious organisations and communities. Assuming social responsibilities and actively engaging with the local population were deemed indispensable and strategic. A Chinese manager from Jade elaborated in a public interview, 'We set up a clinic [for Jade's employees in one plantation]... whenever local residents come, we also serve them and provide their needed services, for free. In



this way, the residents feel that you are not to stay for only one or two years. Instead, you [Jade] are trying to form a community with a shared future with them. Our son, our grandson may also come here to work’.

## 4.2 | International NGO Criticisms of Jade

In a sharp contrast with the positive image portrayed by the Chinese sources, Jade faces scepticism and criticism from NGOs. Despite its past membership with RSPO, it was suspended because of failure in submitting reports for 3 years. Jade has yet to commit to the ‘no deforestation, no planting on peatland and no exploitation’ initiative—a pivotal global effort in the palm oil industry aimed at fostering positive socio-environmental outcomes. Although maintaining its ISPO membership to comply with Indonesian requirements, it is essential to highlight that ISPO itself has faced criticism for its weaker social and environmental safeguards, as discussed earlier.

Beyond abstaining from major global initiatives, Jade has been under international NGO scrutiny for its subpar performance in socio-environmental outcomes. A leading environmental NGO’s reports pinpoint Jade as having one of the highest occurrences of fire spots and an extensive palm presence within forested regions. Furthermore, the company’s transparency shortcomings have garnered significant criticism. Specifically, Jade scores poorly in assessments conducted by a UK-based international conservation charity that regularly evaluates palm oil, tropical forestry and natural rubber companies. These assessments reveal a troubling lack of clarity in Jade’s operations. A further exploration of this issue is presented in a Mongabay article, a major non-profit environmental science and conservation news platform. The article reports that a Jade subsidiary in West Kalimantan cleared significant land for palm oil cultivation without obtaining consent from indigenous village communities. When local advocacy groups and communities sought legal recourse to assert their land rights, Jade displayed unresponsiveness, thereby exposing the company’s passiveness and lack of transparency.

However, many NGO reports also acknowledge the complex nature of socio-environmental issues in Indonesia. In particular, the absence of community consent in acquiring HGUs is a common issue, and practices such as burning forests are often overlooked or inadequately penalised by the Indonesian government. These local governance-related factors play a significant role in environmental degradation and ongoing conflicts between companies and host communities.

## 4.3 | Indonesian Sources

Local sources have also documented Jade’s contribution to local employment, with local news articles pinpointing the large numbers of people employed. A Kontan (a business and financial regular publication in Indonesia) article noted that local government officials in Central Kalimantan encouraged Chinese investment in the palm oil sector because of the prospect of boosting the local economy, inviting Chinese companies including Jade to visit them. Some local news articles and

academic texts have detailed Jade’s CSR contributions, which have also attracted some coverage, including the company donating necessities (such as packaged cooking oil and protective equipment during COVID) to victims of natural disasters in Central and West Kalimantan. The company has also reportedly engaged in infrastructure works, such as road repairs, developing community bridges and funding scholarship programmes in South Kalimantan. Some of these efforts have attracted appreciation from high-level officials in Indonesia. However, it is worth noting that local news coverage of these CSR efforts may be influenced by the company’s public relations efforts, as one of the outlets is directly affiliated with Jade.

Although identifying instances where Jade has been passive and lacking transparency in addressing local discontent, local sources predominantly highlight the deficiencies in Indonesian regulations and their implementation. Notably, criticisms are directed at various land-related regulations for employing vague language regarding palm oil companies’ land use rights and socio-environmental responsibilities, creating ample room for interpretation and negotiation between companies and diverse local stakeholders. In this context, foreign companies, including Jade, might aggravate issues related to land ownership, conflicts and environmental sustainability when robust environmental policies are absent. It is noteworthy, however, that the criticisms rarely focus on Jade’s Chinese identity; instead, blame is predominantly placed on the shortcomings of local governance.

## 5 | Jade on the Ground

### 5.1 | Land Disputes

Throughout our interviews, land disputes emerged as a central theme, significantly shaping stakeholders’ perceptions of the socio-environmental impacts resulting from Jade’s local presence. As mentioned earlier, Jade entered our fieldwork sites through the acquisition of existing plantations in the early 2010s, a typical strategy for foreign investors given the difficulties associated with direct entry. From these acquisitions, Jade inherited problematic land cultivation rights (HGUs) from its predecessors during the land acquisition phase around 2007/2008. Briefly, some of these land rights overlap with the claims of local communities, involving diverse land uses such as plantations for other crops, churches, schools, soccer fields and community estates, all converted without community consent<sup>1</sup>. The distribution of plasma plots has also sparked conflicts. According to several interviewees, Jade has failed to fulfil its promises regarding plasma land allocation outlined in agreements with predecessor companies and local households. Disagreements arise regarding the timing of release, location, quantity and quality/productivity of the plasma plots.

Resolving land disputes locally proves exceedingly challenging. As one interviewee described, the land acquisition processes were chaotic, capitalising on prevalent customary practices—many individuals acted on behalf of their community, signing agreements they did not fully comprehend and failing to maintain consistent communication with their fellow peers<sup>2</sup>. Although contradictions between customary practices and legal formalities in land use rights have caused significant land disputes, the situation is

further exacerbated by several other factors. First, some claim that land mafias were involved in the land acquisition stage, resulting in fraudulent HGUs, which were sold to Jade. Closely related, the role of local governments has been disappointing to multiple stakeholders. There is a shared sentiment that local governments played a minimal role in negotiating with the company, contributing to significant misaligned expectations between the company and local communities, particularly regarding land use rights. Land measurements at the initial stage seemed to be undertaken with minimal care. One interviewee highlighted the flawed HGU measurement process by the National Land Agency, Province, which issues a 'rectangular' shape without conducting local field assessments<sup>3</sup>. In reality, HGUs should have a mosaic layout if a serious measurement method is undertaken. This example illustrates the crude approach authorities take towards land measurement and rights, sparking various problems necessitating negotiation between companies and local communities. Adding to the complexity is that many people who were originally involved in land acquisition have left their positions, including the predecessor companies' public relations staff responsible for communicating, management in co-ops and local leaders, making it almost impossible to trace precise historical information. These factors support one another in feeding ongoing struggles in land disputes, which presents the top dilemma for the company<sup>4</sup>.

Amidst these multi-layered problems, limited assistance can be expected from external sources, whether legal or through RSPO governance. According to several reports in Indonesia, one of Jade's subsidiaries faced legal scrutiny for 'illegal operations within protected forests' in 2020. Despite being initially declared illegal, the company received a free pass based on a permit, which became possible because permits are fragmented and issued by multiple government agents. As one interviewee commented on Jade's planting in protected forest in our fieldwork sites<sup>5</sup>, 'it's not the company's fault if I see it. Because at the time the company was operating, the status was APL [other use area]...'. The subsidiary was also implicated in an RSPO Complaints Panel meeting for 'land grabbing' and 'criminalising and intimidating the local community', but the case was closed after the company argued that the complaint was not directly lodged against them. In other words, legal enforcement can be weakened by the ongoing changes in land governance practices; formal governance's reliance on formal procedures also sits at odds with many customary practices locally, making them unlikely to help defend the interests of local communities.

Faced with this entangled situation, some resolution emerges through the robust presence of local customs in West Kalimantan, where collective bonding prevails. When significant land disputes arise, they often trigger collective protests within local communities, characterised by roadblocks and office occupations aimed at disrupting fruit transport, which is termed the 'fence culture'. Over time, Jade has faced numerous instances of being 'fenced', ultimately leading to compensatory negotiations<sup>6</sup>.

## 5.2 | Broader Socio-Environmental Implications

To contextualise the impacts of Jade's presence, it is important to consider the characteristics of local conditions. Unlike some

other regions in Indonesia, oil palm planting was introduced relatively recently at our fieldwork site, where rubber cultivation remains a primary livelihood. Typically, local villagers manage their own land for subsistence crops while relying on income from rubber to cover various expenses, including their children's education. The introduction of oil palm primarily involved the conversion of forests into plantations, with most conversions occurring during the 2000s, before Jade's arrival. Many locals have retained their rubber plantations. Consequently, oil palm has been integrated as a supplementary component of local livelihoods rather than replacing traditional ones. As a result, some of the most severe impacts described in the literature, such as forcing communities into complete dependence on corporations, have not materialised. Instead, the situation has reached a stalemate, with development limited to areas that were already conceded prior to Jade's entry, whereas expansion has been halted because of the land disputes mentioned earlier.

The most direct interaction between the company and local people occurs through the profit-sharing facilitated by plasma schemes, wherein participating plasma smallholders receive a portion of the harvest through local cooperatives. Disputes have centred around the payouts from the plasmas, with local smallholders expecting greater profits than what is actually distributed. Reaching a consensus has proven difficult, partly due to the declining price of oil palm fruit (at the time of our fieldwork) and the company's claims of poor land productivity. Additional contentions have also arisen over the perceived unfair treatment by the company, including paying a higher price for purchasing fruit from external sources compared with their own estates, scaling fruits solely taken by the company (not also at the co-op), and an observed disparity in maintenance between the company's estate and plasma plots<sup>7</sup>. These factors have compounded challenges and potentially undermined the profits of smallholders.

Although plasma cooperatives are expected to take the lead in negotiating these issues, there is a prevalent perception that they often act passively<sup>8</sup>. Insights from a leader of one such cooperative revealed that critical documentation related to the company was missing after their previous management left, hindering their understanding of binding points and limiting their capacity to engage effectively<sup>9</sup>. More broadly, other interviewees noted that co-op management often lacks basic legal and accounting knowledge, further limiting their capacity to address these challenges even when willing<sup>10</sup>.

The characteristics of oil palm planting, which require intense labour at specific times, have led to the creation of numerous day labourer jobs because of Jade's presence. In one village, almost its entire population is employed by the company in various capacities, such as foremen, security personnel and contractors. However, the low wages, long working hours and piecemeal contracts are deemed largely unattractive, providing another reason for local communities to maintain their rubber crops<sup>11</sup>. To fill these less desirable roles, Jade relies heavily on transmigrants<sup>12</sup>, who have fewer alternative livelihood options compared to many local villagers and are therefore more willing to endure these conditions. On the other hand, the company has also offered a relatively smaller number of better-paid, stable jobs in managerial positions. Although these roles are more

attractive to locals, they are often inaccessible because of barriers such as qualification and experience requirements. Instead, talent is sourced from more developed areas of Indonesia, such as Jakarta and from China. Consequently, although the company provides substantial employment opportunities, these are largely irrelevant to local communities.

While systematic data on livelihood changes before and after Jade's plantation is unavailable, insights from interviews highlight key transformations brought by the company. Many note positive transformations, such as the development of housing and improved road infrastructure<sup>13</sup>, which have connected previously isolated communities and facilitated the transportation of palm oil. These infrastructure developments have been critical for local economic activities, but it is crucial to note that such improvements also serve Jade's own operational needs, as these roads are necessary for the company to transport its produce. Additionally, improvements in land quality, which are attributed to Jade's presence<sup>14</sup>, primarily benefit the company itself, not necessarily the local smallholders. Although some interviewees praised Jade for contributing to infrastructure and disaster relief efforts, others expressed disappointment at the company's minimal investments in broader social welfare, such as education and healthcare. Though the company has responded to local requests for assistance<sup>15</sup>, the perception remains that the benefits are often narrow in scope and insufficient to address broader community needs.

Although environmental impacts hold a prominent position in the English-language reports we reviewed, our interviews yielded limited information on this topic. The primary point raised in the interviews was that the company was ISPO-certified but not RSPO-certified. When further questioned about environmental impacts, several interviewees expressed scepticism towards the term 'sustainability', considering it somewhat superficial and irrelevant. One possible explanation for this perspective is the local context, where the conversion to oil palm primarily involved the transformation of forests not previously used for agriculture, thereby limiting the impacts on existing livelihoods. Despite the profound presence of international NGOs on the deforestation and other environmental issues brought by oil palm plantations, such organisations are absent in our fieldwork sites. As one interviewee further commented<sup>16</sup>, 'maybe their [international NGOs] working methods, their technical guidelines, might be good. But in practice in the field, I have not seen that in [his locality] there are violations of environmental issues that are properly handled... No one has taken it seriously yet'.

### 5.3 | Navigating 'Chineseness'

Based on multiple public interviews and presentations by Jade managers, the company notably prioritises the integration of Chinese employees, Indonesian employees and Chinese-Indonesian staff in mid-level management roles, where Chinese-Indonesian staff are tasked with facilitating communication and decision-making processes. Additionally, Jade is committed to enhancing communication between these ethnic groups through tailored training programmes aimed at equipping staff with technical skills and language proficiency.

Beyond human resource strategies, Jade highlights the importance of maintaining robust communication with various levels of government, industrial associations and religious leaders. As explained by Jade's manager in one of their public speeches, this urgency arises from a substantial disparity in practices between China and Indonesia. Although the Chinese government tends to be more interventionist, particularly when attracting investments is identified as a priority, the Indonesian government adopts a significantly more hands-off approach. It was noted that once land transactions are completed, the Indonesian government withdraws, leaving the company responsible for handling all land compensation and communication with villagers. This cultural difference initially posed a significant challenge for the company, requiring Jade to devise its own approach to dealing with different stakeholders in land compensation, a territory unfamiliar to Jade. It was through a trial-and-error process that the company gradually developed its own approach to managing land disputes, which is essential for avoiding conflicts and disruptions to operations.

Our interviews partly corroborate Jade's public representations. There is a shared sentiment among our interviewees that the company has maintained good communication with various stakeholders, despite some challenges proving too difficult to resolve. Multiple interviewees expressed that Jade's current managers assumed a pivotal role as intermediaries between Jade and the local community, primarily responsible for managing any conflicts that arose. However, this view is also contradicted in some other interviews, which dismiss the company representatives as 'the foreigners', indicating a perceived lack of understanding of the local situation. This is possibly partly attributed to the fact that whenever there was a local protest, Jade tended to replace some of its personnel, leading to a high turnover of staff and disparate views. Overall, our fieldwork does not identify any specific issues with the company's Chinese background. Although minor points are raised, they do not seem to significantly differentiate Jade from other palm oil plantation companies in terms of socio-environmental implications.

## 6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study has analysed the case of Jade to offer insights into the socio-environmental impacts of Chinese investments in Indonesia's palm oil sector. The public discourse surrounding Jade reveals a high level of fragmentation, characterised by divergent viewpoints that reflect the diverse interests and values held by different stakeholders. Chinese sources, including some Chinese-funded English and Indonesian sources, tend to emphasise Jade's economic contributions, portraying it as a model of sustainability. Within this narrative, there is a clear prioritisation of economic growth and development, often accompanied by selective CSR efforts. This stands in stark contrast to the perspectives of international NGOs, which prioritise environmental concerns and raise alarm over perceived transparency deficiencies in Jade's operations within the palm oil industry. These NGOs frequently highlight the ecological ramifications of Jade's activities, such as deforestation and biodiversity loss. Local sources add another layer to this multi-faceted discourse by drawing attention to governance issues specific to the Indonesian context. They identify local governance as a primary

driver of various negative socio-environmental consequences associated with Jade's operations, emphasising the interplay of complex politics and historical legacies within palm oil plantations. This perspective sheds light on the contextual factors shaping industry challenges and underscores the importance of comprehending local dynamics. Together, these perspectives reveal a collision of priorities: Economic growth, environmental protection and governance reform.

Our fieldwork aligns closely with the local narrative, which identifies land conflicts as the central issue, often overshadowing other socio-environmental concerns. Critically, these conflicts are exceedingly difficult to resolve because of contradictions between customary practices and legal frameworks. Fraudulent practices and a hands-off approach from local governments further entrench these conflicts, resulting in protracted negotiations between local communities and the company. Although land conflicts in Indonesia are well-documented in the relevant academic literature (Semedi and Bakker 2014), their centrality in shaping local perceptions of socio-environmental impacts remains undervalued in public discourse. There are also other notable discrepancies between field observations and public discourse. For example, Chinese sources celebrate Jade's 'co-operative planting model' as beneficial for small farmers, overlooking its mandatory nature under Indonesian law and local contention. Similarly, although English sources emphasise environmental and transparency criticisms, our fieldwork indicates these may not be primary concerns for local stakeholders, who prioritise land distribution, profit-sharing and community benefits. These disconnects underscore how local contexts and power dynamics are frequently overlooked or oversimplified in broader discourses, leading to a skewed understanding of the socio-environmental impacts of corporate activities.

Our study further shows that although Chinese companies are often cast as formidable, autonomous actors attempting to advance their own or even (Chinese) national interests (Sutherland et al. 2020), their actions are profoundly shaped by local dynamics. Historical land acquisition complexities, weak governance and customary claims fuel enduring disputes, compounded by ineffective profit-sharing schemes and management challenges. Despite efforts to integrate local expertise, unresolved conflicts frequently disrupt operations, demonstrating that companies' access to land and labour hinges on local cooperation. Notably, despite reports in China, we did not observe significant interference by the Chinese government in Jade's operations. This apparent lack of overt state involvement may be partly attributed to Jade's private ownership. However, as our research did not specifically focus on this aspect, it remains an area for further investigation. In this context, the Chinese identity of companies like Jade is less influential than the historical and cultural specifics of Indonesian society. This observation aligns with Franceschini and Loubere's assertion that many criticisms of Chinese actors reflect broader structural trends rather than uniquely 'Chinese' behaviours (Franceschini and Loubere 2022).

At a broader level, the study highlights critical limitations in China's vision of a 'global ecological civilisation'. Rooted in China's non-interference principle, this vision creates a vacuum in environmental and social safeguards when interacting with contexts of weak socio-environmental governance.

Consequently, the burden of socio-environmental responsibility falls entirely on companies, which, as evidenced in this study, often struggle to meet these expectations without robust regulatory frameworks. Reliance on voluntary measures, such as CSR initiatives, underscores these limitations, as such measures frequently align with corporate priorities rather than addressing broader concerns of marginalised communities most affected by socio-environmental impacts.

Another critical concern is compliance with industry standards. As discussed previously, Indonesia has introduced its domestic ISPO certification over the international RSPO. However, ISPO is often perceived as less stringent, with significant concerns about its limited public participation and transparency (Suharto et al. 2015; Jong 2020). Moreover, ISPO has been criticised for its ambiguous guidelines and definitions, as well as its insufficient social safeguards for indigenous peoples (Jong 2020). These gaps enable companies to exploit profit-sharing and land use arrangements—key sources of local contention. The interplay between China's non-interference principle and Indonesia's ISPO framework reinforces a development model that prioritises economic interests over socio-environmental concerns. This undermines the principles of environmental justice, which advocate the equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens while amplifying marginalised voices. Without addressing these structural gaps, the vision of a 'global ecological civilisation' risks being reduced to rhetoric, failing to achieve sustainable and just outcomes.

Moving forward, it is crucial to consider the implications of our research findings within the changing landscape of Chinese investments in Indonesia. From the Chinese perspective, Indonesia's palm oil sector emerges as a strategic avenue to secure direct control over palm oil production, a vital step considering China's reliance on imports (CDP 2020). For Indonesia, China emerges as a pivotal market for palm oil, especially in the face of declining demand from Europe because of environmental and governance concerns. Unlike the European market, where RSPO certification holds sway, its adoption is less anticipated among Chinese buyers, who represent the primary target for Chinese FDI in palm oil. Consequently, the lack of compliance with RSPO standards among companies operating in Indonesia does not present a significant obstacle, positioning China as an attractive alternative to the European market. The European Union's ban on palm oil biofuels from 2021, escalating to a complete phase-out by 2030, intensifies the need for Indonesia to diversify its markets (Anggoro and Rabindra 2021). The agreement between China's former Premier Li Keqiang and Indonesia's former President Jokowi to boost China's palm oil imports from Indonesia, coupled with Jokowi's administration actively seeking foreign investments, notably through initiatives like the Omnibus Bill, exemplifies Indonesia's strategic efforts (Negara and Suryadinata 2021).

These national developments are expected to catalyse further expansion of Chinese investments in Indonesia's palm oil sector. However, at our fieldwork site, the situation has reached a critical impasse. The underlying issues are deeply entrenched, unresolved for now and held in check by the company's commitment to halt development on contested lands. Yet, new expansion—particularly when it threatens existing



livelihoods—could reignite long-standing conflicts over land and resources, destabilising the fragile status quo. Local residents have so far managed to retain some agency by preserving traditional livelihoods and limiting their reliance on palm oil. However, further expansion risks eroding this agency and pushing them towards marginalisation, as has occurred in other regions of Indonesia.

Ultimately, Indonesia's reliance on Chinese capital and market access, combined with China's principle of non-interference, risks rendering the concept of a 'global ecological civilisation' a hollow ideal—one that promises harmony but overlooks the entrenched conflicts undermining its realisation. In Indonesia's palm oil sector, where economic interests often clash with environmental and social justice concerns, achieving sustainable development will remain elusive without meaningful reforms and a fairer distribution of benefits. These challenges highlight the complex interplay between domestic realities and global aspirations, revealing that genuine progress cannot be achieved without confronting the biases embedded in existing power dynamics. For China, this may require reassessing its non-interference stance—shifting from passive support to a more engaged, context-sensitive approach that actively addresses governance deficits in contexts where capacities are lacking. By aligning its ecological ideals with tangible support for partner countries—such as sharing knowledge, building capacity and addressing systemic inequalities—China has the potential to help translate the rhetoric of ecological civilisation into more concrete outcomes.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Interview with a local parliament leader.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a leader of a local NGO.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a regency official.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Jade's local managers.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with a regency official.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Jade's local managers.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a regency official.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with a chairman of a plasma smallholders association.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a plasma smallholder cooperative leader.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with a chairman of a plasma smallholders association.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a fieldworker.

<sup>12</sup> Transmigrants are individuals who have relocated primarily from Indonesia's densely populated areas, particularly Java, to outer islands. The program aimed to alleviate overcrowding and stimulate regional development, providing a critical supply of labour for palm oil cultivation.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with a hamlet head.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a regency official.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a village head.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a chairman of a plasma smallholders association.

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