

Secrets of the corn

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Highlight: NONFICTION: It's the FBI vs. the Chinese in Iowa farm fields. What are they seeking? High-quality seeds.

Body

Special to the Star Tribune

How do you make a story about some Chinese guys pilfering corn from an Iowa farm field into a fascinating, timely book that is global in scope? Easy. Report as thoroughly and write as well as Minneapolis journalist Mara Hvistendahl does.

Complex (if not very sympathetic) characters abound in "The Scientist and the Spy," especially Robert Mo. Born in a remote village in China's Sichuan Province, he earned his first Ph.D. in China, then moved to the United States to earn his second one at Kansas State University. He lost a research position and, seeking more money to finance a new life in Florida, Mo used good old nepotism to land a job at DBN, a big Chinese agribusiness company whose CEO was married to Mo's sister.

DBN wanted to fight off American giants Monsanto and DuPont Pioneer, whose seed was favored by Chinese farmers. DBN executives hatched a plan to speed up the time-consuming development of its own superior seed lines: steal top-notch seeds from U.S. companies and reverse-engineer them back in China.

Mo was drafted to lead this illegal scheme. Around 2011, he and Chinese colleagues began visiting Iowa farm country, driving around in rented cars to find fields where farmers grew plants from genetically modified inbred seed being developed by Monsanto and others.

The Asians didn't exactly fit in among Iowa's mostly white population. Soon enough, the cops were called, followed shortly by FBI special agent Mark Betten. He and other feds spent two years tracking DBN's "corn spies" in Iowa and elsewhere. They used search warrants, listening devices, helicopter surveillance and GPS tracking to build a case against the Chinese they suspected of stealing Monsanto's extremely lucrative intellectual property.

Federal authorities and the Chinese seed thieves seemed to botch things in roughly equal measure. Mo enlisted American seed breeder Kevin Montgomery, a hire that did not go well. Betten's operation ended in a single

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conviction, while a handful of Mo's co-conspirators successfully fled to China. Betten mishandled an airport interview with Mo's sister at LAX that resulted in all subsequent charges against her being dropped.

Hvistendahl gives the corn-stealing caper the full thriller treatment, complete with evocative, cinematic detail. But the cat-and-mouse story alone is not big potatoes, and is somewhat muddled by an incomplete rendering of exactly what motivates the Chinese government in the risky trade-secret war.

Wisely, Hvistendahl also reports on related complexities of the \$52 billion global seed market. While the FBI would appear to be defending the interests of U.S. agribusiness, companies like Monsanto and Pioneer often were uncooperative in aiding the investigation for fear it might expose corporate secrets. When Mo was arrested and brought to trial, many commentators in Iowa felt it would be bad for recent billion-dollar trade agreements between that state and China. Chinese-American students, researchers and scientists protested what they viewed as racially tinged enforcement that swept up the innocent along with the guilty.

Mo, who sought to live the American dream with his family in Boca Raton, instead was sent to federal prison - his in-court remorse for his actions curdled into anger at the American justice system. After serving his time, he was deported to China.

Claude Peck is a former Star Tribune editor and a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

The Scientist and the Spy

By: Mara Hvistendahl.

Publisher: Riverhead, 321 pages, \$28.

Event: In conversation with Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl, 7 p.m. Feb. 11, Magers & Quinn, 3038 S. Hennepin Av., Mpls.

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