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Whether or not to continue the communal land practices ? —the comparative case studies of two Tibetan villages in the Qinghai-Tibet plateau

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Introduction Since the early 1980s the state policy on agriculture land tenure in China has shifted from communality to "quasi privatization" (households responsibility system). Following the positive effect of improved productivities of this nationwide reform, from the mid 1990s a similar tenure policy started to be implemented on alpine rangeland in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. However, debates on the adoption of farmland tenure policy to rangeland have risen in the past decade. Both supporters and opponents have, interestingly, their own evidences to show whether it is beneficial or not to continue the communal rangeland practice.

Aim of the study and methodology To understand this rangeland tenure policy and its effects, an ethnoecological approach was employed as a holistic and synthetic method. Two Tibetan villages from Qinghai and Sichuan respectively were selected in a pilot case study. A conceptual framework was developed based on literature review and existing arguments. Semi-structured questionnaires were sent to different stakeholders, including researchers, Tibetan pastoralists, policy-makers, and officials. All data and opinions were cross-checked during interviews and discussions, and were classified into biophysical, socio-economic, cultural, and policy dimensions for analysis.

Findings and discussion In many aspects, two case-study sites—Heranseba (H) village of Litang County, NW Sichuan and Zhalinghuerdui (Z) village of Maduo County, headwater source area of the Yellow River, Qinghai—are quite similar: Tibetan pastoralist community, Tibetan Buddhism religion, alpine meadow vegetation, similar policies on rangeland degradation control, etc. However, remarkable differences of rangeland tenure arrangement were found. In H village, the summer-fall pasture is collectively managed by community, while the winter-spring pasture is legally delineated and herded by individual household but somehow is open access to all community livestock. In Z village, all pasture is delineated and managed by individual household, and it has been implemented smoothly.

From systematic comparisons, three noticeable differences were addressed, which are dedicated to the marked differences of the policy implementation at the grassroots level. Comparing H with Z, (1) the pastureland size owned by H village's individual household is much smaller, which increases management cost; (2) the main cash income source of H is *Cordyceps sinensis* while for Z is sheep and yak, thus H has less incentive to increase livestock under the condition of collective land ownership; and (3) with precondition of (1)/(2), cultural norm of killing livestock only for subsistence also reduced incentive for H to expand livestock operation.

Conclusions and the way forward Whether or not to continue the communal land practices depends much on the nonlinear and complex "cause-effect" net nurtured in the local biophysical and socioeconomic context, such as local land availability, livelihood strategies, and cultural norm in the cases of H and Z. Policy making, taking the micro-dynamics into account could lead to more desirable policy outcomes. The ethnoecological approach is significantly useful for understanding these dynamics, and will be a useful tool for present implementation of "Livestock-for-Green" policy in the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau.

Reference

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