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Degradation and re-emergence of the commons: The impacts of government policies on traditional resource management institutions in China

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ABSTRACT

In the vast majority of cases studied to date, rapid changes in indigenous resource management institutions and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) have been reported with profound implications for indigenous livelihoods, biodiversity, and system resilience worldwide. In this case study, we examined how policy changes in China over the past 60 years have influenced indigenous resource management institutions designed to manage common pool pastoral systems in eastern Inner Mongolia. Based on semi-structured interviews ($n = 91$), focus group discussions (64 participants involved), and participant observation, we found that for over half a century rescaling efforts by the Chinese government shifted the focus to national level development planning, which led to the degradation of indigenous institutions that managed common pool pastoral systems in the region. However, we also highlight how local actors have used recent changes in government policies to revitalize traditional herding institutions. This provides a rare glimpse at the re-emergence of the commons from the bottom up.

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1. Introduction

Indigenous people control lands that hold much of the world's biodiversity (White and Martin, 2002; Sobrevila, 2008). The natural resource management institutions of these indigenous communities are embedded within complex and dynamic social-ecological systems (Liu et al., 2007). In the vast majority of cases studied to date, changes in the social-ecological

systems are contributing to rapid changes in indigenous resource management institutions and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) more broadly (see Tang, 2013 for a review) with potentially profound implications for indigenous livelihoods, biodiversity, and system resilience (e.g. Berkes et al., 2005; Lebel et al., 2006; Tang and Gavin, 2010).

Ostrom (1990) proposed eight design principles that contribute to the performance of common-pool resource institutions and have been widely tested and recognized by

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practitioners, researchers and decision makers across the globe (e.g. Adhikari and Lovett, 2006; Cox et al., 2010; Araral, 2014; Haile, 2014). Research on common pool resources has demonstrated that more polycentric systems, which possess multiple nested centers of decision-making (Ostrom, 2012), tend to increase the resilience of social-ecological systems and produce more equitable outcomes for resource users (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008). However, the outcomes of polycentric approaches are mediated by the degree of autonomy provided to local units to develop their own institutions (Ostrom, 1990; Araral, 2014). More polycentric systems tend to produce greater institutional diversity that incorporates a diverse pool of knowledge, promotes innovations in resource management, and creates institutions that are better suited to local contexts (Ostrom, 2005; Gruby and Basurto, 2013; Andersson et al., 2014).

However, the degree of autonomy at the local level, and, in turn, the degree of polycentricity present, is determined in part by the degree to which vertical institutional linkages (i.e. linkages across institutional levels; e.g. from government to local levels) are supportive (Berkes, 2007; Young et al., 2008; Cudney-Bueno and Basurto, 2009). Supportive institutional linkages provide many strategic advantages to local resource management endeavors, including legislative foundations for local control of land and resources, increased access to alternative knowledge systems, buffers against outside threats, and access to funding (Young, 2006; Carlsson and Berkes, 2005; Berkes, 2009; Bodin and Crona, 2009). Of course, institutions are dynamic and not all institutional linkages are supportive, and the impact that institutions at different levels have on local institutions can vary over time and space (Adger et al., 2005; Young, 2009).

One critical driver of local institutional change is the impact of government policies. In a common process Scott (1998) refers to as “state simplification,” central governments seek to drive development by moving away from diverse local resource management systems to a more unified state-shaped environmental management model. This rescaling of environmental management from the local to the state level involves a shift in power, knowledge and flow of resources, which can degrade local institutions and impact environmental sustainability and social justice (Hirsch, 2001; Lebel et al., 2005). Although stakeholders tend to vary greatly in their capacity to shape the scale of focus of natural resource management (Swyngedouw, 1997), the state with its command over policies, laws and links to the media generally has far more control over scale than local entities (Lebel et al., 2005).

To date, the political ecology literature has largely focused on the efforts of state and other extralocal actors to use rescaling to consolidate power and shift environmental and social outcomes (Smith, 1993; Neumann, 2009). Through the examination of a case study from Inner Mongolia, China, we demonstrate how a dynamic institutional landscape can not only create opportunities for state-led rescaling, but may also create possibilities for local actors to revitalize traditional institutions for commons management. This provides a rare glimpse at the (re-)creation of the commons from the bottom-up.

The impacts of Chinese government policies on land tenure and political organization are well documented (e.g. Ao, 2003, 2005; Lian and Lejano, 2014), but the influence of these policies on indigenous resource management practices has been largely unexplored (Tang and Gavin, 2010). We examine how policy changes in China over the past 60 years have influenced indigenous resource management institutions designed to manage common pool pastoral systems in eastern Inner Mongolia. We demonstrate that for over half a century rescaling efforts by the Chinese government shifted the focus to national level development planning, which led to the degradation of indigenous institutions that managed common pool pastoral systems in the region. However, we also highlight how local actors have used recent changes in government policies to revitalize traditional herding institutions.

2. Research setting and methods

To demonstrate the effects of Chinese government policies on indigenous resource management institutions we focus on a case study from Bayin Wenduri gacha,¹ in Xi Wuzhu Muqin Qi² of Inner Mongolia. The site is a typical local community in the region in terms of its land area, population size, population structure, and economic activities (Fig. 1).

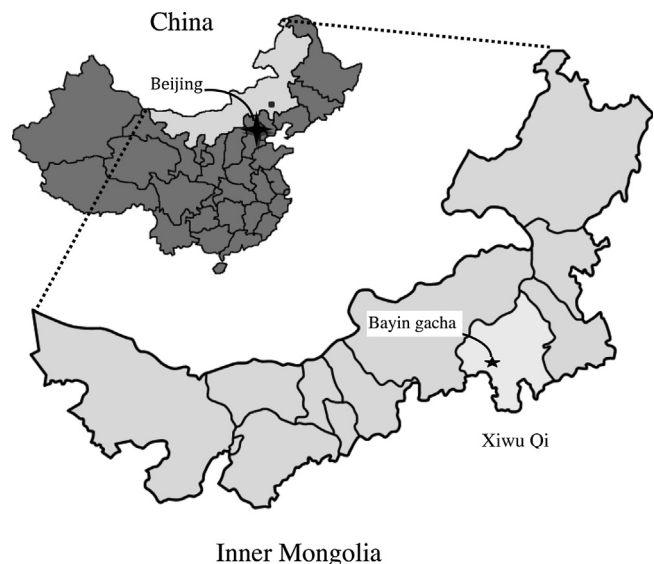


Fig. 1 – The location of Bayin community in Inner Mongolia, China.

Modified from Croquant (2007).

2.1. Geographic information

Bayin gacha covers 380 km² (38,000 ha) with 396 individuals living in 96 households; Sixty-nine households were accessible

¹ Gacha means village in Mongolian.

² Literally means the western Wuzhu Muqin Banner. It will be abbreviated as Xiwu Qi below.

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