

Land interests and land conflicts: An investigation of the determinants of local land institutions in rural China.

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Abstract

Rural land rights reforms have constituted and remain a critical dimension of the social and economic evolution of China since 1978, away from collectivist organization and towards marketization and liberalization. However, despite continuous efforts from the central government to specify extended and secure individual rights over agricultural land, and to homogenize land practices across China, local institutional arrangements have remained extremely diversified, with, generally, limited and insecure individual rights over land.

In particular, in some villages, collective authorities have kept the habit of retaining direct control over some land plots, known as “reserve fields”, whereas land markets are only slowly replacing the allocation of land through collective redistribution.

This paper aims to identify, both theoretically and empirically, with the rural part of the 2002 China Household Income Project (CHIP) survey which covered almost 38000 individuals in 960 villages, the determinants of local institutional arrangements over land and of local land practices in Chinese villages. In particular, we try to assess the roles of different actors, local leaders and various interest groups among farmers, in shaping local land institutions. Our working hypothesis is that the relative influence and the interests of these different groups of agents are respectively determined by local political processes, especially the existence of village-level democracy, and by the economic and fiscal contexts.

Our main results are that, whereas, quite un-surprisingly, village leaders have a tendency to limit and jeopardize individual land rights for their own benefit, rural citizens themselves have conflicting interests over land, a situation which can, in some cases, lead them to accept or favor institutional arrangements with limited or insecure land rights, and collective processes of land distribution over land markets.

With this paper, we hope to bring some new elements on the much debated issue of land rights insecurity in China, by establishing that local institutional arrangements over land depend on villages' political economy.

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