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Divergent institutional trajectories under a common policy framework: a comparative study of two pastoral townships on the eastern Tibetan Plateau

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Pastoral regions in China have undergone profound transformations under state-led reforms and changing resource conditions. This study examines how similar policy frameworks generate divergent institutional trajectories in two neighboring pastoral townships on the eastern Tibetan Plateau. Drawing on fieldwork and historical records, it analyzes adjustments to the household responsibility system in response to population shifts, the rising value of caterpillar fungus, and advances in land surveying technologies. The findings reveal contrasting patterns: one township experienced frequent institutional adjustments, while the other maintained long-term stability. This divergence is associated with differences in local governance, particularly the presence or absence of intermediary organizations between the state and pastoral households which can function as a bricolage. The study highlights how local governance mediates the interaction between state policy and resource dynamics, producing divergent trajectories in pastoral regions.

KEYWORDS
institutional change, pastoralism, resource governance, state–society relations, Tibetan Plateau

Introduction

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the transition from planned economies to market-oriented systems in socialist countries (Heller, 1998; Kornai, 1990: 80; Finke, 2012:159–175). These studies engage with property rights from diverse empirical contexts and, in different ways, question the assumptions of classical economics regarding coherent, exclusive, and fully specified private property rights regimes. Since the 1980s, China has gradually implemented the Household Responsibility System (HRS) in both rural and pastoral areas. Before these reforms, pastoralism in Tibetan pastoral areas was characterized by four-season transhumance adapted to mountainous ecological conditions and the collective use of rangelands. This traditional pastoral system remained largely intact until the 1980s (Goldstein, 2012; Yamaguchi, 2011). Extensive research has debated the applicability of the HRS to pastoral contexts. Many studies argue that the individualization of land-use rights under the HRS is poorly suited to the ecological and social conditions of pastoralism, giving rise to outcomes often described as a "tragedy of privatization" in rangelands (Williams, 1996; Banks, 2001; Li and Huntsinger, 2011). These concerns are commonly articulated through empirical observations of overgrazing, grassland degradation, rising vulnerability among herders, and the erosion of traditional systems of mutual aid.



FIGURE 1
Location of the two study townships: Serlung and Kocê.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the transition from collective land use to the HRS on the eastern Tibetan Plateau, with particular attention to the uneven evolution of the policy in different localities. While land arrangements under the HRS were repeatedly adjusted in some areas, reflecting considerable flexibility in local implementation, in others the initial allocations remained largely unchanged. In other words, local actors differ in the extent to which they reinterpret, negotiate, and modify formal property rights arrangements in practice.

It therefore asks: First, what driving forces underlie the continuous adjustments to land property rights; Second, why the evolution of land property rights followed different logics in the two regions. We will observe that, despite both regions experiencing shifts in the relative value of grassland resources due to factors like the emergence of caterpillar fungus—a wild, high-value resource—and population growth, and both facing pressure to implement the HRS, their responses and paths of institutional evolution diverged significantly.

Materials and methods

Study area

Fieldwork was conducted in two pastoral areas on the eastern Tibetan Plateau, one in Henan Mongol Autonomous County, Qinghai Province, and the other in Xiahe County, Gansu Province. During the fieldwork, the author examined grassland institutional practices in seven townships and selected Kocê and Serlung as the primary cases for comparative analysis (Figure 1). The two townships were selected because they are geographically adjacent and were subject to broadly similar formal policy frameworks, yet developed markedly different grassland management arrangements following the implementation of the HRS Kocê undertook multiple pastureland readjustments in response to changing distributive pressures associated with improvements in surveying technology, the emergence of caterpillar fungus as a valuable resource, demographic change, and state grassland subsidies, whereas Serlung largely retained its initial allocation. This comparison provides an opportunity to examine why similar pressures generated different institutional responses under broadly comparable policy conditions.

Data collection and analysis

During the research period, in January 2025 and from July to October 2025, the author was based in Henan Mongol Autonomous County and traveled regularly by car among herding households, local archives, and government offices. Interviewees were recruited primarily through snowball sampling, beginning with individuals familiar with local pasture governance and subsequently expanding through referrals to other relevant participants. Some key informants were interviewed or consulted multiple times over the course of the fieldwork. They mainly included township and village-level officials who had directly participated in the implementation and subsequent adjustment of the HRS, as well as local elders with firsthand memories of these institutional changes. The interviews were intended to reconstruct processes of institutional change from the perspectives of actors directly involved in or familiar with them, rather than to constitute a statistically representative sample.

In addition to interviews, government documents related to policy implementation and historical livestock statistics were collected from local archives and statistical yearbooks to complement the interview evidence and trace longer-term changes in pastoral production. Nevertheless, retrospective accounts remain subject to potential recall bias, which is

acknowledged as a limitation of the study. To protect interviewee privacy, interview materials are coded using the format "specific interview date + initials."

Because part of the analysis relies on retrospective accounts, particularly regarding the early implementation of the HRS, interview transcripts, field notes, archival records were analyzed comparatively across the two cases. The analysis focused on the relationship between formally recognized pasture-use rights and property practices, particularly how these rights were interpreted, negotiated, reproduced, or modified through pasture readjustment, collective use, subsidy distribution, boundary negotiation, and local rules. The two cases were compared along common dimensions, including the stability and adjustment of use rights, distributive practices, and the actors involved in negotiation. Interview accounts were cross-checked across respondents and, where possible, against archival and statistical materials, while interviewees' interpretations were distinguished from documentary evidence and field observations.

Results

Existing analyses of pathways for institutional change

Historical–administrative boundary congruence as an alternative explanation

One alternative explanation concerns the relationship between historical socio-territorial organization and contemporary administrative boundaries. Yeh (2003), for example, shows that mismatches between older socio-territorial identities and state administrative boundaries can generate tensions and unintended consequences in the implementation of rangeland policies. Some interviewees similarly attributed Kocê's capacity for repeated pastureland readjustments to the substantial overlap between its present administrative boundaries and earlier governmental, monastic, and tribal divisions, which they believed facilitated local coordination (Interview Record-20250905, DGZX). This explanation, however, cannot fully account for the divergence between the two townships, because Serlung exhibits a comparable degree of historical continuity.

Historically, Serlung belonged to the Mda' tshan (མདའ་མཚན) Banner, a subdivision of the Henan Mongol Banner. Its administrative boundaries have remained largely unchanged, and descendants of the former Mda' tshan tribal leadership continue to be recognized as respected village elders. Kocê similarly developed within the historical institutional networks linking the Henan Mongol Banner, local Tibetan pastoral communities, and the Labrang monastic system (Henan Mongol Autonomous County Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 1996, p. 62). Thus, despite differences in their particular histories, both townships were embedded in relatively continuous local administrative, religious, and community structures. Historical continuity alone therefore cannot explain why repeated pastureland readjustments occurred in Kocê but not in Serlung.

Critical institutionalism: bricolage and relative resource values

Legal pluralism and institutional bricolage offer useful perspectives for understanding divergent trajectories of institutional change. Legal pluralism starts from a simple observation: state law is not the only source of rules. Formal law, customary rules, community norms, and other forms of authority coexist and interact within the same social field (Griffiths, 1986; Merry, 1988). Formal property rights therefore change as they enter local practice. Local actors interpret them through existing rules and forms of authority rather than simply implementing them as written.

Institutional bricolage goes further. It asks how actors draw on, reinterpret, and combine rules from different sources. Studies of pastoral governance suggest that such combinations can accommodate different stakeholders and make formal institutions work in local settings (Fokou and Bonfoh, 2016). But bricolage does not necessarily produce effective institutions. Rules can complement one another, but they can also conflict (Thornton et al., 2012). Nor can an institutional arrangement satisfy all stakeholders. Actors favor different rules, possess unequal bargaining power, and act through different organizations. Historical contingencies also shape what becomes possible.

Bricolage, then, is better treated as a process than as a solution. Its analytical value lies in showing how local actors reshape formal institutions in practice, not in assuming that this reshaping improves them. The question is which rules enter property practices, which do not, and who has the capacity to make that distinction matter. This question directs attention to intermediary organizations. They provide arenas in which actors negotiate competing claims and translate some of them into property practices. Their presence, however, does not by itself produce institutional adaptability.

Moreover, North's theory of institutional change links changes in relative prices and bargaining power to changes in property rights. As resource values shift, actors who stand to gain may seek more exclusive property rights as their bargaining position improves (North, 1990, 84–85). Yet a temporary strategic advantage does not necessarily translate into institutional change. Critical institutionalism draws attention to how economic incentives are embedded in pre-existing social relations and normative obligations (Cleaver, 2012). Evidence from pastoral Namibia illustrates this point: although prolonged drought increases the bargaining power of those controlling scarce grazing resources, kinship ties and community obligations can constrain them from exploiting this advantage for individual gain (Schnegg and Linke, 2015). There exists a certain resistance to treating water and pasture as purely economic commodities. In arid and semi-arid grassland ecosystems, the scarcity and spatial variability of precipitation strongly constrain vegetation growth, resulting in scarce and unevenly distributed pasture resources. Many livestock face starvation and death due to insufficient nutritious forage. While formal, exclusive water management systems should impose high fees on outsiders, communities rarely charge higher rates as stipulated in management plans when foreign livestock—whether herded or wandering freely—reach water wells. They are typically asked to pay only a nominal fee for diesel fuel, or even nothing at all (Schnegg and Bollig, 2016).

This suggests that shifts in resource valuation merely alter local bargaining dynamics, while a larger underlying system regulates outcomes. Our focus lies in understanding the nature of this system and how it facilitates or hinders institutional change. This study takes the argument one step further by asking why such regulatory capacity persists in some communities but not in others, even among otherwise comparable communities operating under the same policy framework. Rather than treating community regulation as a given, I examine the organizational conditions under which local norms can continue to shape collective decisions and institutional change.

Path dependence and institutional change

North's concept of path dependence also helps explain divergent trajectories of institutional change. Delayed feedback, ideology, and self-reinforcing processes can prevent efficient institutions from displacing inefficient ones. Efficient institutional development is therefore exceptional rather than typical: throughout much of history, actors' experience and ideologies have failed to combine in ways that produce efficient outcomes (North, 1990: 96).

We can view the above two scenarios as distinct paths of institutional change. In one path, institutions undergo continuous transformation, with efficient and inefficient systems competing and replacing one another. In the other model, institutional change proceeds slowly—as Marx observed in Asian societies—where social institutions have long lacked transformative shifts (Marx, 1996: Chapter 14).

However, when explaining why different societies follow divergent paths of institutional change, invoking path dependence alone often proves insufficient. Path dependence theory emphasizes the significance of early institutional choices and their self-reinforcing effects, offering valuable insights into institutional stability. Yet without further analysis of specific conditions and operational mechanisms, its explanations remain largely retrospective (Liebowitz and Margolis, 1995). In other words, without clarifying which differences are amplified under what circumstances to produce institutional outcomes, path dependence risks becoming an all-encompassing analytical framework that accommodates every variation. At the same time, research on path dependence must clearly define its self-reinforcing mechanisms, testable conditions, and empirical boundaries; otherwise, it will face problems of conceptual ambiguity and unfalsifiability (Vergne and Durand, 2010). As implicitly raised in North's classic discussion of institutional change: Why did similar demographic pressures give rise to transregional trade networks and nation-states in Europe, yet fail to produce analogous institutional outcomes in other societies? Responding solely with path dependence may presuppose that European history inherently possessed a more favorable institutional tradition for property rights systems and market exchange, thereby logically falling into a circular reasoning of inferring causes from outcomes.

Therefore, rather than simplistically attributing institutional differences to historical paths alone, we should further inquire: under what political-social structures and conditions of actor interaction is institutional change more likely to occur, while in other contexts existing institutions exhibit greater stability and inertia? Based on this research orientation, this paper shifts its focus to the concrete process of institutional implementation within the context of a strong state tradition. Through a case study of the implementation process of the HRS on the eastern Tibetan Plateau, this paper seeks to reveal how institutional arrangements are understood, adapted, and executed within local societies, thereby illustrating how institutional change manifests differentiated pathways within a strong state institutional environment.

Intermediary organizations and the analytical framework

In *The Professional Ethic and the Civic Ethic*, Durkheim pointed out that workers' conditions were already dire before the French Revolution, yet the socialist movement only emerged after the Revolution (Durkheim, 2010: 68–69). This occurred because the Revolution eliminated intermediate social organizations (guilds), plunging the two major classes into complete opposition. An intermediary organization can serve as a bridge, functioning both as an information channel and a corrective mechanism while liberating individuals from the confines of the family. This paper builds on North's framework by examining institutional change at the level of practice, focusing on how institutions are adjusted in specific contexts and shaped by particular political and social structures. Specifically, it examines institutional change pathways by treating the relationship between state and society as an explanatory variable. Here, the explanatory framework becomes clear: In a state-intermediary-herder model, intermediary organizations can respond to emerging problems by adapting state policies through local rules, norms, and traditions. In contrast, problems are more likely to accumulate under a state-household model. The distance between the state and herders creates information delays, while individual households have limited capacity for collective coordination.

It should be noted that, in the Chinese context, such intermediary organizations should not be understood as traditional organizations that stand outside the state or oppose it. While they retain certain traditional functions—such as local authority, collective deliberation, and internal mediation—they are also embedded within the state's governance structure and legitimize their actions by absorbing and repurposing state discourse. In other words, intermediary organizations do not pit "tradition" against the "state," but rather reinterpret local demands within the framework of state institutions and transform them into arguments that can be understood and accepted by the administrative system. Existing research also indicates that local actors do not merely passively accept formal institutions; rather, they often recombine state policies, local norms, and practical interests through "institutional assemblage," discursive borrowing, and strategic adaptation (Cleaver, 2012; Qian et al., 2023; Yeh, 2022; Grant, 2025).

At the same time, intermediary organizations are not agencies for implementing state policies, but rather arenas for the interaction and negotiation among multiple forces. On the one hand, they connect downward with villagers, elders, and specific resource users, absorbing local knowledge, historical memory, and demands for resource allocation; on the other hand, they connect upward with township governments and the formal administrative system,

translating the opinions of local communities into governance issues that can be recognized by the policy system. In this regard, intermediary organizations can simultaneously serve as bridges, information channels, and corrective mechanisms. They can serve as a buffer between state policies and local practices, transforming simple administrative orders into actionable local arrangements; they can also correct institutional arrangements through internal deliberation when policy implementation deviates from intent or sparks controversy (Durkheim, 2010: 68–69; Wang, 2015; Tsering, 2024).

However, in the Chinese context, the existence of such organizations is not without conditions. To maintain a sustainable space for operation, they must demonstrate their governance capacity while operating within the institutional boundaries recognized by the state. Their governance capacity lies in mediating disputes, maintaining order, conveying information, and reducing the costs of grassroots governance.

Case analysis: two pathways of pastureland property rights change

Unintended consequences and redistributive pressures

The essence of the HRS is not to privatize pastures, but rather to grant herding households land-use rights for a fixed term while maintaining state ownership of the land, thereby resolving the free-rider problem that existed under the previous "big pot"[1] model. The contract term is generally 50 years in pastoral areas and 30 years in agricultural areas. Following the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, the second round of rural land contracts was further extended for another 30 years upon expiration (National People's Congress, 2018). Over the more than 40 years since its implementation, the HRS has provided herders with a relatively stable institutional framework, but it has also faced numerous unintended consequences, creating pressures regarding fairness. These pressures stem primarily from the following aspects:

First, the initial surveying methods were relatively crude (Interview Record—20250911, SNDJ); boundaries were often demarcated by hand gestures and visual estimation. As technology advanced and more precise surveying methods were introduced, the validity of the original demarcations came into question.

Second, newly born children had no land to be allocated. Even if a child was born just 1 day later than the demarcation date, they received no share of the pasture; this group is now in their forties. Consequently, land redistribution has become an internal family matter, which in turn raises another issue: while some families have only one heir to the pasture—with the others finding alternative livelihoods—other herding households must divide their pastures into small, fragmented plots among multiple family members, leading to a situation where "some have many family members but little land, while others have little land but many family members." "Children born after this cutoff date have no share of livestock and no share of pastureland; this is currently the most pressing issue in pastoral areas." (Interview Record—20250727, QJ & JYZMNN; Interview Record—20250905, GB).

Third, government pasture subsidies are allocated based on the area of pasture contracted by herders in a given year. This means that herding households fortunate enough to secure larger pastures see their income double (Interview Record—20250905, GB).

Fourth, the uneven distribution of caterpillar fungus has created a greater sense of unfairness. The commercial value of caterpillar fungus was not recognized by the market during the early stages of the HRS; consequently, it did not serve as a basis for the initial allocation of pastures. When caterpillar fungus became highly sought-after in the market and emerged as one of herders' primary sources of income, people began to reevaluate the rationality of the original pasture allocation methods. In particular, the original allocation followed the logic that "lowland pastures of good quality should be smaller in area, while highland pastures of poor quality should be larger; safe pastures within the inner ring should be smaller, while dangerous pastures along administrative boundaries should be larger." Today, however, caterpillar fungus has appeared in highland pastures, which have also become more habitable due to global warming; simultaneously, pastures along administrative boundaries have become safer thanks to technological advancements (such as barbed wire fencing). An elderly villager recalled: "When the pastures were allocated, there was a rocky patch that nobody wanted, so one household ended up with it. Several years later, caterpillar fungus became valuable, and that household became very wealthy. Nobody could have known at the time that caterpillar fungus would become so valuable. People see this as fate or pure luck—there is nothing we can do about it." (Interview Record—20250924, JTFT).

Fifth, the growing pressure for employment in recent years has made the pastures increasingly important, both economically and politically. Grandma JY remarked: "With today's children, you raise them for twenty or 30 years, but they do not even know how to herd livestock. When they come back, they cannot even get a contract job.[2] The county does not provide job placements, and their families have no land or livestock, so many end up relying on their parents or, with no other options, are forced to wander." (Interview Record—20250727, QJ & JYZMNN).

The four land readjustments in Kocê Town and subsequent changes

Kocê Town is located in Xiahe County in the eastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. As of 2020, its permanent resident population was 3,733. Unlike areas where pasture allocation was completed in a single step, Kocê's pasture system is characterized by a tiered allocation and continuous adjustment among pastures across different seasons. Allocation of winter pastures began as early as 1985 and was largely finalized by 1995; allocation of autumn pastures was not completed until 2016; and summer pastures

1 "Big pot" (daguofan) was a common expression during China's collective era, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, for egalitarian distribution that largely ignored differences in individual contributions.

2 In the Chinese context, contract workers refer to employees who are hired under fixed-term or task-based labor contracts rather than holding permanent, state-assigned positions.

remain under shared use to this day due to long-standing boundary disputes with neighboring communities.

Building on this foundation, Kocê has undergone multiple rounds of local readjustments. In 1991 and 1994, after errors in the initial surveying were discovered, some village groups corrected the existing arrangements through pasture exchanges and reallocations. In this process, herders voiced complaints, consulted local religious leaders, and exchanged pasture plots through lotteries to reach collective decisions.

Since 2012, grassland ecological compensation and incentive funds have not been distributed strictly based on the area of contracted pastures, but have instead been allocated primarily according to the current population.[3]

> "To date, grassland subsidies for the entire Kocê area are distributed based on the current population. A child receives a share upon birth, and an elderly person's share is removed upon death. The total amount is over 11 million" (Interview Record—20250905, GB).

During the fall 2016 grassland allocation, the local community also used the current population as the primary benchmark. At the same time, proceeds from caterpillar fungus harvesting in some village groups are still shared collectively, and there have been discussions within the local community about the possibility of readjusting winter pasture allocations based on current population figures in the future.

It is evident, therefore, that Kocê does not regard the initial allocation results as immutable, fixed rights. Instead, under the influence of multiple factors—including changes in household size, measurement errors, fluctuations in resource value, and disputes across community boundaries—the existing arrangements are continuously refined through population-based benchmarks and collective consultation. Within this institutional logic, fairness does not primarily stem from the stability of the initial allocation, but rather from the ongoing confirmation of membership in the current community. In other words, through redistribution based on current population and collective consultation, Kocê maintains the acceptability and local legitimacy of the pasture system.

Land use right arrangements in Serlung Township

Serlung Township, on the other hand, has followed a different path of institutional transformation. Serlung Township is part of the Henan Mongol Autonomous County and comprises five administrative villages; its permanent resident population was 3,733 in 2020. During the pasture contracting process, with the exception of two villages that retained communal use of summer pastures, most other villages adopted a one-time allocation method based on the compensation logic of "allocating more to those with poorer-quality pastures and less to those with higher-quality pastures" (Interview Record—20250924, JTFT-NM), dividing the year-round pastures entirely among households. Consequently, the initial allocation created a strong institutional lock-in effect in Serlung: pasture boundaries, contracted areas, and household rights are largely determined by the initial allocation results, leaving relatively limited room for subsequent adjustments.

In local readjustment practices, Serlung has also largely continued the logic of the initial allocation. Since 2012, grassland ecological subsidy and reward funds have been calculated primarily based on the area of contracted pastures, thereby directly linking subsidy benefits to existing contracted areas. After 2016, in the two villages that continued to retain the communal use of summer pastures, the allocation of summer pasture shares was not redistributed based on current population figures but instead retained the population benchmarks established during the initial pasture allocation. In other words, even though some pastures still retained a communal use arrangement, the internal allocation of shares remained governed by the logic of the original household-based distribution.

Consequently, unlike Kocê, Serlung has not established a mechanism for continuous adjustment based on current population changes but has largely retained the rights structure established by the initial allocation. Its institutional logic does not involve continuously readjusting shares in response to changes in household population, births, deaths, and resource returns; rather, it treats the state's initial allocation as the source of stable rights and uses contracted area as the basis for subsidy distribution and the calculation of resource returns. Thus, Serlung has developed a stabilization pathway centered on the initial allocation.

Behind the differentiated evolutionary pathways

Local perspectives on pastureland readjustment

Differences in how local stakeholders perceive and respond to institutional arrangements may provide one explanation for the divergent outcomes observed in the two townships.

In Serlung, legitimacy derives primarily from the authority initially granted by the state. On the question of whether pastureland can be reallocated, herders generally use central government policy as their benchmark and view the freeze on property rights as an institutional constraint rather than a local choice. Interviewees emphasized that "once allocated, it cannot be altered," tracing this principle back to the official narrative of "no changes for 50 years, as proposed during the Deng Xiaoping era," which was "extended by about 30 years" (Interview Record-20250924, JTFT-E).

Under this logic, individuals born after the contracting period are no longer regarded as potential rights holders, and herders view intra-family inheritance or redistribution as "private arrangements" rather than property rights practices on par with the state's contracting system. Herders' explanations of wealth disparities also follow this logic. A typical narrative is: "Those who took over the rocky land that no one wanted back then have now

3 "Current population" refers to the population recognized as eligible for pastureland allocation at the time of each readjustment, rather than the present-day population. Eligibility was determined according to an individual's status at the time of allocation. For example, students were entitled to a share, whereas government employees were not. A person who was a student at the time of allocation retained the allocated share even if they later became a government employee. Children of local residents could also remain eligible even when their parents worked outside the locality.

become wealthy thanks to caterpillar fungus." Wealth accumulation is understood as "fate" or "luck" (Interview Record-20250924, JTFT-E), rather than the result of individual effort within a specific institutional structure. Such statements appeared repeatedly in the interviews, indicating that in a context of highly locked-in institutions, there is a lack of mechanisms linking "resource changes" to "institutional responses," leaving members of society with no choice but to interpret the formation of disparities through fatalistic narratives.

From the government's perspective, the initial demarcation and allocation of pastures required large-scale administrative mobilization; once completed, the process should not be easily reopened. At the level of institutional implementation, local governments generally emphasized the immutability of the initial pasture demarcation, citing both the rigidity of policy and constraints on administrative capacity. An official involved in pasture contracting recalled in an interview that the initial demarcation "mobilized over a thousand people and took a full 3 years to complete." The sheer scale of the undertaking was evident not only in boundary surveying and technical operations but also in the subsequent fulfillment of compensation and bonus payments and the implementation of administrative procedures (Interview Record-20250923, MGL). Therefore, in his view, attempting to "refine" or redistribute the pastures more than a decade after the implementation of the contracting system—whether through boundary redefinition or compensation arrangements—would be "completely unfeasible" given the existing policy framework and administrative burden. It is thus evident that, from an official perspective, the lock-in of the grassland contracting system stems not only from the policy requirement of "long-term stability" promised by higher authorities but also from the practical constraints faced by local governments in terms of organizational mobilization, financial compensation, and implementation capacity.

This structure reinforces the stability of property rights but also limits the system's ability to adapt to changes in resources, thereby transforming potential governance risks into long-term accumulated social uncertainty.

Kocê, however, reflects a fundamentally different view of pasture use rights. Locally, there is a stronger emphasis on the principle of "a share for everyone"—that is, pastures belong not only to family members present at the time of initial allocation but also to past, present, and future members of the community. In Kocê, initial measurement errors, changes in birth rates and household size, the distribution of pasture subsidies, and disparities in income resulting from the rising value of caterpillar fungus have all facilitated further redistribution or a new round of land arrangements.

From the local government's perspective, the region's strong tradition of self-organization continues to play an important role, reducing the costs of local coordination and mobilization. Although some practices in Kocê depart from conventional administrative approaches, local officials generally allow a degree of autonomous arrangement as long as these practices remain within established policy boundaries. As one official noted, "the state now encourages local village regulations and codes of conduct." (Interview Record-20250905, DGZX) Some locally developed practices have subsequently received official recognition. One example is the Qianyangya livestock-recovery practice, a community-organized arrangement through which herders collectively identify and return livestock that have strayed into other herds. Originating in the 1980s, the practice was later incorporated into local conflict-resolution efforts and reported by state media.

Village officials also point out that contracting out pastureland does not equate to private property; the pastures still retain their nature as collectively owned and public resources.

> "The initial contract term for the pastures is 30 years, and after 30 years, the land can be reallocated. This year marks exactly 30 years; after 30 years, you do not know if the land will still be yours. If you mine or dredge sand on it, taking everything of value, and ultimately leave the collective with barren land, no one would want it if it were redistributed, right?" (Interview Record—20250814, DG & JYQZ)

Elderly villagers further emphasized that the pastures are resources passed down from their ancestors and therefore cannot be viewed merely as the fixed property of those present at the time of the initial allocation. A village official who commands great respect among the people remarked:

> "Back during the HRS, livestock and pastures were distributed according to population; it makes perfect sense that pasture subsidies are now distributed per capita as well. . . . So many people and livestock have died fighting over this land, so it must be shared among everyone. This is the sacred land of Jamyang Jigme Wangpo [a historically revered religious figure associated with the founding of the community]; this is the village he established" (Interview Record—20250905, GB).

For the locals, contracting out pastureland does not equate to complete, exclusive ownership; on the contrary, individual usage rights are always understood as a limited right embedded within collective interests and long-term social order. This limitation does not exist solely in institutional texts but is constantly reaffirmed and internalized through daily practices and moral teachings. As one interviewee recalled, even when gathering a small amount of firewood during his childhood, he had to ask "Grandfather Kocê"[4] for forgiveness and symbolically "request permission" to indicate that the action was unavoidable; Arbitrary logging is viewed locally as an unacceptable transgression, and even today, this constraint remains in effect except for state-led essential infrastructure projects (Interview Record-20250905, GB).

It is precisely on the basis of this understanding of property rights that Kocê's institutional practices exhibit a governance orientation characterized by proactive adaptation. Whether it involves implementing collective ownership of mineral resources, prohibiting the leasing of pastures to outsiders, restricting billiards activities that might evolve into gambling, or reserving public passageways along roads, these regulations are not intended as *ex post facto* punishments for individual violations. Rather, they seek to preemptively block potential conflicts and disorder by tightening property rights boundaries and usage conditions before risks materialize (see Supplementary Material 1 for details).

4 "Grandfather Kocê" is the local name for a sacred mountain regarded as a protective deity by the surrounding pastoral community.

Consequently, limited property rights have not weakened the effectiveness of resource governance; rather, they have become a prerequisite for the sustained operation of institutional adjustments and risk prevention, enabling the village to maintain a relatively stable internal order in the face of changes in resource value, population mobility, and external intervention.

Resource conditions and the persistence of intermediary organizations

However, when explaining institutional arrangements, the reasons given by actors do not always correspond to the actual causal mechanisms. Some explanations may be ex post rationalizations made after institutional outcomes have already taken shape, while others may point to the mechanisms that actually come into play. Therefore, the key issue is not merely how local societies interpret a particular institutional arrangement, but rather which actors are able to enter the arena of institutional negotiation, which demands are heard, and which actors have the capacity to influence and reshape institutional outcomes. Existing research has already pointed out that institutions are not the natural evolution of neutral rules, but are often the result of power asymmetries, conflicts over resource allocation, and strategic interactions among actors (Knight, 1992; Ensminger, 1992).

In many pastoral areas of China, the space for traditional organizations and older generations of herders to participate in institutional negotiation processes has gradually narrowed. There are at least three reasons for this. First, village officials have become younger, and their governance styles have changed. This reflects a broader effort to rejuvenate rural leadership, from the selection of younger cadres to the recruitment of university graduates and other young people into village governance (CPC Central Committee, 1999; CPC Central Committee, 2008; CPC Central Committee, 2019). They are more familiar with higher-level policies, administrative forms, and project procedures, but do not necessarily rely to the same extent on traditional authority, local knowledge, and elder-mediated consultation mechanisms (Interview Record—20250719, ZDDJ; Field Notes—20250902, DL). Previous studies have also documented generational differences in pasture use and preferences (Cole, 2003; Sevgi and Yulu, 2025). Second, following the allocation of pastures to individual households, the functions of many traditional organizations have weakened. In the past, matters such as seasonal transhumance arrangements, the maintenance of communal grazing order, and the mediation of conflicts over pasture use relied on internal coordination mechanisms within villages and the authority of elders; however, once pasture boundaries were fixed to individual households, these matters were formally replaced, at least in part, by property rights boundaries and administrative rules, thereby reducing the necessity for traditional organizations to continue playing a role (Interview Record—20250717, ZXDZ). Third, following the abolition of the agricultural tax around 2005, the role of traditional local organizations in day-to-day governance was further diminished. In the past, some grassroots organizations relied on familiar relationships and local authority to collect taxes and fees, mobilize labor, and coordinate public affairs; with the reduction in tax and fee burdens, the rationale for retaining such organizations within the daily governance structure correspondingly diminished.

The significance of Kocê lies in the fact that it preserves an intermediary organization capable of serving as a forum for institutional coordination. In this area, elderly herders make up about two-fifths of village-level organizations, and traditional authority continues to be recognized. This is not a natural continuation of traditional factors but is related to specific local governance needs. Since summer pastures are still shared with neighboring communities, boundary disputes and conflicts over resource use occur from time to time; local governance therefore still relies on elderly herders who are familiar with historical boundaries, transhumance routes, household relationships, and local customs. Scholars have already noted that this hybrid form of rangeland governance, which arises from a state of weak divisibility of resources, has been identified (Tsering, 2026). In this context, traditional authority has not been completely supplanted by the formal administrative system but has instead been re-embedded into grassroots governance through village-level organizations.

Township officials also emphasized in interviews that elderly herders play an irreplaceable role in mediating pasture disputes, conveying local opinions to higher authorities, and maintaining village order (Interview Record—20250905, DGZX). They not only possess local knowledge but also hold moral authority and coordination skills recognized by villagers. Consequently, the intermediary organizations in Kocê are not merely administrative transmission mechanisms but rather negotiation platforms linking state policies, village organizations, and local norms. It is through this platform that traditional authority, local knowledge, and villagers' demands are incorporated into the process of institutional adjustment, thereby influencing pasture allocations, subsidy distributions, and rules for shared use.

The role of intermediary organizations can be seen more clearly in negotiations over grassland subsidies, caterpillar fungus revenues, and village regulations. A respected local elder who had previously served as a cadre recalled that senior local cadres played an important role in bringing community claims into negotiations with the government. When Kocê decided to distribute grassland subsidies according to the current population rather than pasture area, county officials expressed concern because this differed from the practice adopted elsewhere. Local cadres nevertheless defended the arrangement on distributive grounds: "I was still a CPPCC[5] member at the time. I said that if anything went wrong, we could take responsibility. We were not putting the money into our own pockets; this was for the welfare and fairness of the community" (Interview Record—20250905, GB).

These decisions were not simply imposed by local leaders. Different views were debated, with senior cadres playing an important role in mediating competing claims. A similar process occurred when existing local practices were formalized as written village regulations in 2015. Former cadres and community members participated in the discussions, the proposed rules were repeatedly revised in response to local feedback, and the final version was

5 CPPCC refers to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a political advisory body whose members participate in consultation on public affairs.

endorsed by the local government, monastery, and three village committees. As the interviewee explained, "It was not something I came up with on my own. We asked many people for their opinions and revised the rules repeatedly" (Interview Record—20250905, GB). Intermediary organizations thus mattered not simply because they existed, but because they provided an arena in which local claims could be articulated, negotiated, and translated into locally accepted rules.

It is evident, therefore, that the differences between the two models of institutional transition cannot be simply attributed to "stronger traditional authority" or "weaker state power" in a given locality. More accurately, traditional resources can only be transformed into institutional outcomes when they are given space for expression within specific organizational structures. The reason Kocê has developed a strong capacity for continuous adjustment is that its intermediary organizations have preserved channels for transforming local knowledge and traditional authority into public decision-making; in other regions, however, when the functions of traditional organizations are supplanted by property rights boundaries, administrative procedures, and a younger cadre structure, local societies—even if they still possess historical memory and traditional norms—find it difficult to effectively engage in the process of institutional negotiation. The key to institutional differentiation, therefore, does not lie in the mere existence of tradition, but in whether tradition can, through organizational forms, enter the arena of policy implementation and institutional reproduction.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper begins by analyzing two comparable case studies based on over 4 decades of pasture management practices in two pastoral townships on the eastern Tibetan Plateau. In the first case, as herders' perceptions evolved and the value of resources continued to change, new governance issues continually emerged; however, local actors and their organizations possessed the capacity to adapt and respond to these issues. In contrast, in the other case, herders and grassroots organizations made no adjustments to existing property rights arrangements, even though resource conditions and perceptions of fairness had changed. It is worth noting that herders in both areas derive their understanding of fairness from official narratives, yet differences arise due to varying institutional emphases. In the former scenario, policy discourse emphasizes the "limitations" of herding households' property rights: contract terms are finite, organizations can use regulations to clarify what herding households are prohibited from doing, and adherence to established distribution rules is required, thereby achieving a structure akin to "land to the tiller." The latter scenario, however, emphasizes that the contracting system falls within the realm of national policy, and grassroots organizations have no authority to interfere, thereby giving rise to a "family-centered" logic of property rights and social norms (Sneath, 2000:vi). From the perspective of institutional types, the former achieves timely identification and correction of problems through institutional embedding and continuous adjustment; the latter, without interfering with property rights arrangements, enables herding households to maintain their asset accumulation at the household level.

A comparative analysis reveals that Kocê exhibits a certain degree of local agency. This agency further substantiates existing research on local agency (Cleaver, 2012; Qian et al., 2023; Yeh, 2022; Grant, 2025). Local officials did not advocate for pasture adjustments solely on the basis of traditional customs or local sentiments; rather, they drew upon the language of the state institutions themselves to provide legitimacy for the adjustments. For example, they emphasized that contracting rights are time-limited, that pastures are not privately owned, and that contracting relationships do not equate to permanent, exclusive property rights. Consequently, pasture adjustments are not framed as a rejection of state policy but are interpreted as necessary corrections—within the framework of collective ownership and contract terms—to account for population changes, surveying errors, and disparities in resource returns. In this way, local organizations embed the local concept of equity—that "everyone has a share"—into the state's discourse on property rights, thereby granting the readjustments greater institutional expressibility.

Building on existing economic theory, this paper makes three contributions. First, institutional change does not occur solely in response to shifts in resource value; its pathways and modes also depend heavily on the structural links between the state and society. In particular, the existence of intermediary organizations significantly influences the pace of institutional adjustment. Second, the relationship between "control over scarce resources" and "bargaining power" in local contexts is not linear or unidirectionally determined; rather, it is continuously moderated and shaped by people's understanding of fairness and the traditions of reciprocity within the community. In Kocê's experience, an individual's or household's actual control over scarce resources does not automatically translate into a negotiating advantage in collective affairs. On the contrary, this transformation process is always embedded within the local community's shared understanding of "reasonable possession," "legitimate use," and "moderation." Once a mode of resource possession is perceived as crossing the boundaries of fairness, the relevant actors may instead lose their legitimacy in collective deliberations, thereby weakening their bargaining power. Furthermore, the community's tradition of reciprocity plays a crucial buffering and constraining role in this process. Long-established obligations of mutual aid, reputation mechanisms, and moral judgments compel resource holders to balance their pursuit of self-interest with the maintenance of ongoing relationships with others. This reciprocal structure does not eliminate conflict; rather, by embedding strategic interactions within repeated exchanges, it limits the possibility of short-term advantages being transformed into exclusive dominance. Consequently, scarce resources do not simply reinforce the position of the powerful; instead, under specific conditions, they prompt actors to adopt more restrained and negotiable strategies. Third, the Kocê case further illustrates that the relationship between resources and organizations is not unidirectional but mutually shaping. The more contentious and indivisible a resource is, the greater the need for organizational coordination. Pastures, caterpillar fungus profits, and seasonal grazing areas are not simply divisible resources: they involve not only boundaries, eligibility, and shares, but also historical memory, ecological risks, and relationships among

neighboring communities. It is precisely these resources—which are difficult to partition and highly contentious—that reinforce local societies' need for intermediary organizations. In turn, these intermediary organizations influence how these resources are understood, negotiated, and redistributed. They not only manage resource conflicts but also reshape the institutional significance of resources: pastures can be understood as family-contracted land or as common resources passed down from ancestors; caterpillar fungus profits can be interpreted as individual luck or as shared benefits derived from collective membership. Whether different interpretations can become effective institutional claims depends on the existence of an organizational arena capable of accommodating, translating, and coordinating these demands. This also distinguishes our argument from existing work on legal pluralism, institutional bricolage, and critical institutionalism. Rather than taking the regulatory role of local institutions as given, we show how particular resource conditions can sustain the organizational capacity through which local rules and norms continue to shape property practices.

Building on a comparative analysis of pasture property rights adjustments, a further extension reveals that the proposition—"control over scarce resources → attainment of a relative bargaining position → development of exclusive property rights"—is not a universal law in reality but rather closer to an exception under specific conditions. In reality, resource competition is often not a one-time game but is embedded in long-term, repeated interactions. In this process, actors must not only consider current gains but also take into account reputation, relationships, and the possibility of future cooperation. Therefore, even in competitive relationships, actors often exercise a degree of restraint and flexibility rather than pursuing complete exclusion once they gain a dominant position. For example, after pastures were allocated to individual households, some herders found themselves on pastures lacking water sources; however, the herders who controlled these water sources did not use this to establish exclusionary systems or charge fees for access. In other words, scarcity did not automatically translate into exclusionary property rights arrangements. This was not simply due to institutional gaps or a lack of business acumen among the herders, but rather because they were constrained by a "survival ethic"—the implicit understanding that, in resource allocation, every member should have access to water sufficient to sustain basic survival. To a certain extent, this norm restricts the complete commodification and exclusive use of water resources, thereby maintaining a minimal logic of sharing in practice. Through a comparison of the cases of Kocê and Serlung, this chapter demonstrates that in regions like Kocê—where relatively traditional or well-developed traditional organizations still prevail—the logic of sharing based on the ethics of survival is particularly prominent. This is reflected not only in the frequent adjustments to pasture and caterpillar fungus property rights but also in all aspects of daily life.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Since the data consist primarily of interview records, there are no formal written signatures or similar documentation. However, all respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and the interviews were conducted only with their consent. The interview data were anonymized to protect the participants' identities.

Author contributions

TB conceived the study, conducted the fieldwork, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontierspartnerships.org/articles/10.3389/past.2026.16810/full#supplementary-material

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