Individual rights or common access? Farmers’ preferences for reallocating the property rights of communal farmland and forestland in Southeast China

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Although common property favors common and equal access to natural resources, it is argued to compromise individual rights and impair efficiency by impeding market exchange. We explore the trade-offs between individual rights and common access in different reallocation problems of communal farmland and forests and investigate the effect of social preferences, the difficulty of reallocation and rent-seeking possibilities on farmers’ institutional preferences in these trade-offs. The field experiment and questionnaire surveys are conducted to collect data from five communities in Southeast China. Using bivariate ordered / binary probit models, we find farmers with strong altruism and inequality-aversion are more likely to support a more equal and inclusive reallocation scheme, and the effects of social preferences on reallocation preferences vary across reallocation contexts with different corresponding stakes, current resource use rules, and specific ethical controversies involved. The difficulty of reallocation negatively affects farmers’ reallocation preferences, while rent-seeking possibilities have no effect on reallocation preferences. Farmers have a stronger reallocation preference in the case of communal forests than farmland because of the higher difficulty of reallocating farmland. This research provides insights into understanding the trade-off between efficiency and equality in land use, farmers’ property rights preferences across different resource use contexts and the role of social preferences in resource management preferences and behaviors.