

**BOOK REVIEW**

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# Review of *Restoring Community Connections to the Land: Building Resilience Through Community-based Rangeland Management in China and Mongolia* edited by Maria E. Fernández-Giménez, Xiaoyi Wang, B. Batkhishig, Julia A. Klein and Robin S. Reid

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## Book details

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## Review

Drought, snowstorms, sandstorms, land degradation, rangeland fragmentation, population growth, poverty, settlement of nomadic people, marginalization and other issues challenging rangeland environments and societies have attracted strong attention from decision-makers, scholars and NGOs for decades. In addition, rangelands that have been marginalized from the development framework now have increased interactions and connections with external worlds through globalization, market connections and government intervention, coupled with climate change. There have been numerous empirical studies concerning these issues, but a more critical and challenging question is how to deal with these challenges. *Restoring Community Connections to the Land: Building Resilience Through Community-based Rangeland Management in China and Mongolia* edited by Maria E. Fernández-Giménez and her colleagues (five ecologists and sociologists from Colorado State University, USA, and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China) provides a framework of resilience thinking and seven detailed case studies of community-based rangeland management (CBRM) in China and Mongolia. These cases explore the potential for community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) for maintaining the resilience of rangeland social-ecological systems.

This book contributes precious insights and experiences from Inner Asia to the field of rangeland management and pastoral development, which used to be dominated by studies in Africa.

The authors have developed a conceptual framework based on social-ecological system theory and resilience thinking, and organized their case studies within that framework. The book is an outcome of a 'collaborative, interdisciplinary research of pastoral practices (IDR) across three scales of examinations: disciplines (e.g. hydrology, climatology, resources management), culture (e.g. China, Mongolia, USA) and sectors (e.g. government agents, non-governmental organizations, stakeholders)' (p. 48).

The core of this book is seven case studies of CBRM in China and Mongolia written by 33 authors, who describe how herders in diverse social contexts (China and Mongolia), ecosystems (forest-steppe, typical steppe, desert-steppe and alpine grassland) and cultural backgrounds (Mongolian, Han, Kazakh and Tibetan) manage their grasslands. The case studies are not written in the same structure, but rather 'each case study has its unique and illustrative attributes that make place-based experiences distinct, richly woven, and beyond generalization' (p. 30). For example, the Pifang case study focuses on how to foster institutions that support democratic consultation between herders and local government, and provide herders with opportunities for playing an active role in grassland conservation. In the Sonid Left Banner case, a cooperative made up of seven families changed their initial objective of boosting incomes through better participation in the market, and instead focused on improving their ability to cope with natural disasters. The Altay case describes the traditional CBRM practices of Kazakh pastoralists and how these were gradually weakened under climatic and social changes. This case further discusses how the development of social resilience weakened resilience of local natural ecosystem. The Maqu case focuses on the Household Responsibility System which induced semi-private property rights of rangeland in pastoral areas where common property had been practiced for hundreds of years. This analysis compares the ecological outcomes and economic efficiency of grassland management models based on single versus multiple households. In the Huolonggou case, the authors wrote their story from the perspective of herders. They talked about how local Tibetan pastoralists identified the environmental problems they were facing and how they conserved and restored the ecosystem through informal rules, a micro-credit system and modern technologies. The Jinst case compares the outcomes of communities who practiced CBRM with those who did not, in terms of four aspects of social-ecological system resilience. In this case study, the authors paid more attention to theoretical analysis and only briefly describe how the CBRM groups operated. In contrast, the Ikhtamir case describes in detail how Pasture User Groups work and how such groups helped to re-establish rules and order in rangeland utilization after communes were dismantled. From these case studies with different focuses, readers can see the innovative capabilities of pastoralists in different situations and the diversity of CBRM, as well as the unique research methods, interests and writing styles of the chapter authors.

Based on the summary of the case studies, this book explores several questions: What factors contributed to the emergence of CBRM? What organizational models

and management strategies were employed in these cases? What was common? What were the outcomes of CBRM? What challenges were being faced? How did CBRM help to improve the resilience of social-ecological system? The summary of the book reflects on the case studies in a systematic manner, although the case studies are so diverse, informative and unique that it is hard to draw simple conclusions, and especially difficult to make strict and effective comparisons among case studies. This may be the reason why the authors have failed to generate some new perspectives on CBRM and resilience. In fact, it is possible to answer some more profound questions through comparative analyses of these case studies. For example, while sharing the same cultural background, the pastoral communities of Inner Mongolia of China and of Mongolia have experienced different kinds of state intervention in the past decades. What social and cultural differences have emerged in the pastoral communities in these two countries, in response to these interventions? How have these differences affected the re-establishment of CBRM organizations and, thus, the resilience of local social-ecological systems? There are still some critical questions left unanswered regarding 'the role of CBRM in maintaining the resilience of social-ecological systems'. For example, how to make the CBRM organizations sustainable, especially the sustainability of the systems that are established with heavy reliance on external supports, once the external supports are ended? Although climate change is a key challenge to most of the communities in the seven case studies, this book did not mention whether or how CBRM could help local communities to adapt to climate change.

The influences of government and markets on pastoral communities are inevitable in modern times, whereas in CBRM studies, often limited attention is devoted to these aspects. This book fills this gap to a certain extent. The cases studies demonstrate that the effects of market engagement and state policies have stimulated the development of current CBRM initiatives. In China, CBRM was established to solve the negative social and ecological consequences of changes in land tenure and top-down environment restoration policies. In Mongolia, external donors launched different CBRM organizations to deal with problems of absent institutions and order in grassland utilization after communes were dismantled. In both countries, local pastoralists encountered the challenge of expanding markets and the question of better participation in the market. The CBRM organizations described in all the case studies made an effort to address issues related to marketing. The case studies also provided some critical commentary on the assumption that state policies and market involvement are detrimental to pastoral areas or that state government is irrelevant to CBRM organizations, arguing that 'the state and the market both have essential roles to play in fostering rural development in pastoral regions' (p. 217). The authors further conclude that CBRM organizations could play an essential role in connecting pastoralists with external markets and government.

In general, this book is an informative and resourceful book on rangeland management in Inner Asia. It provides readers with a vivid picture of the environmental, social and political changes and challenges that pastoral societies face in different regions. Readers could also benefit from learning the wisdom and efforts of local pastoralists and other stakeholders to solve their practical problems in diverse local

settings. From an academic perspective, this book further develops the field of social-ecological theory and resilience thinking by systematically connecting theories with management practices.

**Competing interests**

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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