



Research

“I’ll be back”: the emergence of recentralized forest devolution in the southern provinces of China

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ABSTRACT. Although forest devolution, as a type of decentralization, is a high priority in the policy agendas of developing countries, recentralization has also occurred. In this paper, we focus on emerging recentralization within the devolution process of Collective Forest Tenure Reform (CFTR) in China’s southern provinces and conceptualize this process as “recentralized forest devolution.” In this paper, we update a key framework for analyzing decentralization and recentralization in governance processes based on the “policy arrangement approach.” Case studies were conducted in four counties of the Fujian and Yunnan provinces by tracing governance dynamics from 2001 to 2019. Our study found that the central government has tightened upward accountability and recentralized power for environmental conservation since 2012 under the discourse of “Ecological Civilization.” At the local level, recentralized forest devolution was expressed in terms of the restricted timber harvest levels for the purposes of environmental conservation. Therefore, forest devolution could be more vulnerable than expected by researchers and potentially interwoven with recentralization processes. Discourses, actors, property rights, and power are, therefore, considered to be interwoven in the complex dynamics of decentralization and recentralization.

Key Words: *China; collective forest tenure reform; forest devolution; policy arrangement approach; recentralization*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, decentralization has gradually become a popular regulatory approach to improve natural resource governance by moving power away from the center in many developing countries (Tacconi 2007, Larson and Soto 2008, Lund et al. 2018). Forest devolution is a special type of decentralization in which a government devolves control of forest resources for local non-governmental actors (Edmunds and Wollenberg 2003, Thanh and Sikor 2006, Dang et al. 2018). In the context of forest devolution and other decentralization, local governmental or non-governmental bodies are more capable of effectively and legitimately regulating natural resource management issues than distant, top-down, and centralized governance institutions (Lemos and Agrawal 2006, Agrawal et al. 2008, Lund et al. 2018).

In this paper, we contribute to the discussion using a Chinese case as the study focus. The Chinese government initiated a forest devolution reform in 2003, which was labeled as the Collective Forest Tenure Reform (CFTR). Prior to the implementation of the CFTR, property rights over forestland in rural communities were handled by government-controlled village committees. Following the initiation of the CFTR, the government has entitled property rights to rural households, relaxed the restrictions on timber harvesting, and encouraged private investment in forestry. The CFTR has most fundamentally affected the southern provinces, where high density rural populations rely heavily on forest resources (Yin et al. 2013, Liu et al. 2017a, Xu and Hyde 2019). However, recentralization has been sequential and parallel to forest devolution in recent years. Although forest devolution still exists in the context of policy, the process of recentralization began in 2012 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held its 18th National Congress, suggesting that environmental conservation was embraced under the discourse of Ecological Civilization (*shengtai wenming*) (Kostka and Nahm 2017, Hansen

et al. 2018). Since then, the government has implemented environmental conservation policies, including restrictions on households’ practices of forest use, while still claiming to support the CFTR and protect property rights (Liu et al. 2016, Li et al. 2021).

Our study addresses two gaps in the literature. Studies on Chinese forest devolution have focused on the impacts of CFTR on forestry investments but have largely neglected to examine the changes in intergovernmental relations within the country and the relations between governmental agencies and rural households. In addition, despite there being extensive literature on the decentralization of natural resource governance, relatively little attention has been paid to the characteristics of the subsequent or parallel processes of recentralization. Therefore, this study seeks to clarify “forest devolution” and “recentralized forest devolution,” and to examine the Chinese case study. The following two research questions were posed.

1. What were the key characteristics of Chinese “forest devolution” after the introduction of CFTR in 2003?
2. What have been the key characteristics of the emerging mode of “recentralized forest devolution” since 2012?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the second section, we briefly explore the historical background of the CFTR. In the third section, we establish a conceptual framework for analyzing forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution in relation to other types of decentralization and recentralization. In the fourth section, we detail the research design, data collection, and the data analysis. In the fifth section, the results are presented, and in the sixth section, the results are discussed in the context of the decentralization and recentralization literature, with the final section concluding the paper.

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CFTR

To achieve public interest according to the doctrine of the socialist revolution, only two types of forestland ownership existed in China after 1956, namely, state-owned forestland and collectively owned forestland. In general, the state-owned forestland comprises forests confiscated from landlords, and “ownerless” large forestland that has been nationalized by the government. Collectively owned forestland was expropriated from peasants’ forestland and then transferred to form government-controlled communes (State Forestry Administration (SFA) 1999). However, a series of socialistic policies proved to be counterproductive, and in some cases, even fatal, such as the Great Famine from 1958–1962 (Zhou 2012, Dikötter 2018) and the Cultural Revolution from 1966–1976 (Wang et al. 2004). After 1976, the political priority gradually shifted from socialist revolution to economic development under the new CCP leadership generation. In 1981, the central government initiated the three-fixes reform (*linye sanding*), which was the first forest devolution concerning collectively owned forestland. Part of this initiative reformed collectively owned forestland by allocating some family forestland (*ziliushan*) to rural households for daily use and some contracted forestland (*zerenshan*) to fulfill timber production as part of the socialist planning system (Liu et al. 2017b, Zhang et al. 2020). The family forestland was allocated for long-term use and had no expiry date, whereas the contracted forestland was allocated for shorter durations from 5–15 yr. Meanwhile, the revised Constitution in 1982 relaxed governmental control over rural areas by abolishing people’s communes and establishing village committees. However, the central government received reports of deforestation and forest degradation, resulting in the suspension of the three-fixes reform in 1987. This restricted the timber harvest and led to a substantial portion of family forestland and contracted forestland being moved into collective forest management by village committees. In an unstable political environment, rural households doubted the credibility of these reforms and started to undertake excessive timber harvesting for cash (Yin et al. 2013, Liu et al. 2017b).

Although the three-fix reform was unsuccessful, the forestry reforms did not stop. At the dawn of China’s marketization reform, forest classification (*linye fenlei jingying*) was initiated in 1998 by the central government. Forestland was therefore divided into two types, namely commercial and ecological forestland. Commercial forestland provides timber products to meet market demands, whereas ecological forestland is strictly protected with the implementation of restrictive felling requirements (SFA 1999). Given the two types of forestland ownership and forest classification, forestland in China is categorized into four types: (1) commercial collectively owned forestland (CCOF), (2) ecological collectively owned forestland (ECOF), (3) commercial state-owned forestland, and (4) ecological state-owned forestland. In 2018, CCOF and ECOF accounted for 35.24% and 26.84%, respectively, of the forestland nationwide (State Forestry and Grassland Administration (SFGA) 2019).

Within this context, after the three-fixes reform, momentum for forest devolution grew in the 2000s. The central government authorized Fujian Province to pilot the CFTR in 2003 and extended it nationwide in 2008 (Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party (CCCCP) and State Council 2008). The CFTR comprises clarification, formalization, and allocation of property

rights to non-governmental actors. China’s legal system stipulates four rights, namely, forestland ownership, forestland usufructuary rights, timber ownership, and timber usufructuary rights (Standing Committee of the People’s National Congress (SCPNC) 2002, State Council 2000). Due to socialist legitimacy, the ownership of collectively owned forestland cannot be privatized (CCCCP and State Council 2008). Therefore, to circumvent this, the CFTR only allowed the entitlement of forestland usufructuary rights, timber ownership, and timber usufructuary rights to be transferred away from village committees to non-governmental actors. Rural households could be entitled to forestland usufructuary rights for up to 70 yr, with these being renewed thereafter, suggesting that rural households were permanently entitled to timber ownership and timber usufructuary rights (Yin et al. 2013, Zhang et al. 2020). The CFTR achieved formalization by issuing a forestland use certificate (FUC). An FUC clarifies which village owns the forestland, who owns the forestland usufructuary rights, the timber ownership, and the timber usufructuary rights, as well as the duration of the forestland usufructuary rights (SFA 2000a, 2004).

Commercial collectively owned forestland is the focus of our analysis, whereas ECOF is not, because the ECOF has been under strict environmental conservation. Most provinces have clarified that the ECOF should not be allocated away from the village committees. Regarding the CCOF, the government followed the egalitarian principle of allocation. The CFTR required that most of the CCOF was allocated to rural households and allowed the village committees to attain a fraction of the CCOF for funding organizational operations. To secure village revenues and activate the forestry market, the CFTR also allowed some CCOF to be commercialized by business actors through auctions. The government delegated local officials to guide a forestland allocation plan, which needed to reach a two out of three consensus among all the households in each village to increase transparency and avoid corruption (CCCCP and State Council 2008).

Despite these above changes, the government still needed to relax a series of restrictions on timber harvest to support the implementation of the CFTR. The government feared that a complete deregulation of timber harvest rights could lead to deforestation and degradation. The government also controlled the timber harvest for the sake of taxation, whereby forestry departments required the FUC owners to pay a forestry levy (*linye jinfei*) before timber harvest (Liu et al. 2004).

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING FOREST DEVOLUTION AND RECENTRALIZED FOREST DEVOLUTION

Definitions of decentralization and recentralization in the literature

Decentralization is defined as transferring centralized power away from the top in a political administrative hierarchy (Larson and Soto 2008). Modern English use of decentralization dates back to the post-French Revolution era in the 19th century when “décentralisation” was an effort to retrench the centralized power of the French government (Schmidt 1991). Over time, the English use of decentralization has been conceptualized and re-conceptualized according to various schools of thought. Since

the 1980s, decentralization has been considered to solve various challenges in developing countries, such as enhancing participation, service delivery, and efficiency of governance. However, recentralization is a recurring phenomenon. For example, Schmidt (1991) highlights that recentralization accompanied decentralization during the post-French Revolution era.

There are several variants of decentralization. Apart from forest devolution, administrative (deconcentration) and political (democratic) decentralization are two other types mentioned in the forest governance literature (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Falleti 2005, Ribot et al. 2006, Larson and Soto 2008). Administrative decentralization refers to the transfer of discretionary power from higher to lower-level governments to make decisions and mobilize resources to provide services. Political decentralization occurs when a centralized government is reformed to be (more) downwardly accountable to non-governmental actors. Administrative and political recentralization are defined as reversing trends of administrative and political decentralization, respectively.

The definition of forest devolution, however, lacks consensus in the academic literature, including the new concept of “recentralized forest devolution.” The definition of forest devolution includes the transfer of certain powers (Sundar 2001, Thanh and Sikor 2006), property rights (Dang et al. 2017, Yiwen et al. 2020), and forest management practices (Sikor and Thanh 2007, Thuy et al. 2021) from government and non-governmental actors. Given this lack of consensus, we decided to incorporate power to analyze decision making on forest governance and to incorporate property rights to examine who holds the rights according to our own definition to act upon forest resources. Therefore, forest management was excluded as an independent concept to avoid overlapping meanings with property rights. Given that our analysis encompasses the framework of property rights proposed by Schlager and Ostrom (1992), which clarifies these as a bundle of rights, forest management is included as one of its dimensions. However, this definition of forest devolution and the definition of “recentralized forest devolution” will be explored further based on the policy arrangement approach (PAA) and clarified in the section “Forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution.”

Analyzing (recentralized) forest devolution through the policy arrangement approach

The PAA is a mid-range theory for policy analysis that was originally developed to analyze changes in environmental policy (Arts and van Tatenhove 2004, Arts et al. 2006). It was built upon the structuration theory and is continually inspired by the ongoing development and debate in discourse analysis, neo-institutionalism, and the policy network framework. The PAA defines the policy arrangement as the way in which a certain policy domain is temporarily shaped in terms of discourses, actors, rules of the game, and power. Discourses refer to the interactive process of idea formation in public deliberation and policy making (Ochieng et al. 2016). Actors are defined as individuals, groups, and organizations that share policy discourses, rules of the game, and/or power in the policy domain. The rules of the game delineate the boundary of a policy domain, defining the manner in which a “policy game” should be played. Power positions refer to actors in relation to the other actors, and shape the capacity

of the actors to mobilize resources and influence policy outcomes. This is mediated through the rules of the game and an asymmetrical division of resources (Arts et al. 2006, Arts and Buizer 2009, Ayana et al. 2013). Discourses, actors, rules of the game, and power are interwoven, leading to temporary stabilization and destabilization. In the following sections, the PAA will be further operationalized to analyze decentralization and recentralization and to clarify the definitions of forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution.

Discourses

In this study, discourses are considered to be ideas shared or contested via communication about social and material worlds (Arts and Buizer 2009, Ochieng et al. 2018). As the content of discourse, ideas can be classified into three types, namely, policy, programmatic, and philosophical ideas (Schmidt 2008, Mehta 2010). At the first level, policy ideas refer to policy solutions through which given problems can be solved. At the deeper second level, programmatic ideas contextualize problems in a given social environment and justify certain policy ideas as solutions to these problems. At the deepest third level, philosophical ideas refer to taken-for-granted, hidden, and often unspoken principles and assumptions that frame policy and programmatic ideas. Despite being stable for a longer period on many occasions, philosophical ideas can nonetheless change quickly. This can lead to an immediate breakdown in times of crisis or gradual and continuous small changes without such an immediate breakdown (Schmidt 2017, Arts 2021). Actors draw upon and change discourses by interacting with each other in the context of the rules of the game and the given power relations (Arts and Buizer 2009, Arts 2021). This paper examines two relevant discourses—CFTR and Ecological Civilization—and analyzes the three levels of ideas within these discourses to understand recentralized forest devolution in China.

Actors

The actors involved vary across different policy contexts. The types of decentralization and recentralization depend on which actors are empowered in a specific context. The first distinction is the recognition of multiple levels of government actors. In China, the government is a socialist and centralized unitary institution within a top-down political-administrative hierarchy. The government is stratified into five levels encompassing central, provincial, prefectural, county, and township governments. The forestry departments are established within the governments from the central to county level (Xu et al. 2020). The county forestry department leads township forestry stations in implementing forest policies in rural areas. The second distinction is among the non-governmental actors such as the village committees, rural households, and business actors. Compared with rural households and business actors, a village committee is a semi-governmental organization, despite the Chinese constitutional stipulation of village autonomy. A village committee bifurcates into a party branch of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and a village branch. The party branch is appointed by the government, whereas the village branch is elected by rural households. However, it is strongly influenced by government interventions (Zhang et al. 2019, Xu et al. 2020). Considering these strong ties, meaningful devolution must empower rural households. As observed by Sikor and Thanh (2007), the Chinese and Vietnamese case studies sharing similar socialistic contexts were, therefore, marked by forest devolution to households.

Rules of the game

Rules of the game delineate a policy domain including what issues are at stake, how decisions are made, and who is accountable to whom. Therefore, they guide and constrain the behaviors of the actors involved (Arts et al. 2006). In this study, the rules of the game are operationalized through the concept of “property rights” to analyze the extent to which an actor can act upon forest resources in relation to the other actors (Schlager and Ostrom 1992, Larson and Soto 2008, Dang et al. 2018). Property rights are further elaborated into a bundle of rights as established by Schlager and Ostrom (1992), namely, access, withdrawal, management, exclusion, and alienation. Access refers to the right to enter a defined area. Withdrawal refers to the right to obtain the products of resources. Management refers to the right to modify and improve these resources. Exclusion refers to the right to determine who can or cannot use these resources. Alienation refers to the right to sell or lease some or all these rights to others. An actor can hold all these rights, but in other cases, this may refer to a few of these rights, or one specific right. An actor with more rights can also act more autonomously in the context of forest resources with less dependence on the interventions of others.

Power

Based on the structuration theory (Giddens 1984) and Clegg (1989) analysis of power, the PAA considers power as “dispositional” at the level of policy arrangement. Power positions actors in relation to each other with the capacity to make decisions on resource mobilization and policy outcomes (Arts and van Tatenhove 2004). Power is further classified into two types, namely discretionary power and accountability (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Ribot 2003). Discretionary power refers to the power vested in an actor to enact and enforce new rules of the game, and raise and use financial resources. Accountability is the power vested in an actor to be capable of counteracting the arbitrary actions of others. There are two types of accountability in the political-administrative hierarchy, namely, upward and downward accountability. Upward accountability occurs when a government is accountable to a higher level of government. Downward accountability occurs when a government is accountable to non-governmental actors in its jurisdiction.

Forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution

On the basis of the theoretical analysis undertaken, forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution are defined in this study as follows:

- Forest devolution refers to the transfer of discretionary power from governmental to non-governmental actors in a political-administrative hierarchy.
- Recentralized forest devolution refers to the transfer of some discretionary power from non-governmental actors back to governmental actors, whereas other previously devolved forms of discretionary power could still rest with former non-governmental actors.

These definitions are based on two arguments, including that we use power as the basis for both definitions, not property rights, as some other researchers have done. This is because power is a more inclusive concept for understanding decentralization and recentralization than property rights. Although a change in the

property rights could alter the power relations, property rights could not exhaust the explanations for the changes in power. Elections, party politics, and intergovernmental relations can influence the balance of power among actors (Agrawal and Ribot 1999, Kung et al. 2009). In cases of forest devolution, changes in property rights are not necessarily the only cause of power changes. Forest devolution can involve changes in power in terms of compliance and rule enforcement, forest condition monitoring, and marketing regulations (Edmunds and Wollenberg 2003, Ambus and Hoberg 2011), which are loosely related to property rights. Our definitions of forest devolution and recentralized forest devolution should be sufficiently differentiated from other types of de/recentralization, such as those that are administrative and political. The concept of “accountability” is now related to political de/recentralization, and not to devolution.

METHODOLOGY

Considering China’s vast territory and insufficient research on the CFTR, Ecological Civilization, and relevant policies, we cannot suggest that “forest devolution” and subsequent “recentralized forest devolution” perform invariantly in different regions. Therefore, an exploratory comparable case study is used in the methodology. This is because a diverse case selection with a minimum of two case studies provides more extensive insights than a single one (Gerring 2006, Yin 2013).

In our analysis, the unit of analysis is positioned at the county level for two reasons. First, Chinese forest law defines a forestry department at the county level as the basic unit for exercising forest policies (National People’s Congress (NPC) 2019). A county forestry department “receives” policies from the upper levels, adapts policies to the county needs, and implements those policies in rural areas. Second, central policy documents were systematically placed in the archival rooms of the county forestry department. Officials are experienced in addressing forest policy changes, whereas local non-official actors directly experience the impacts of such changes. What has been decentralized and recentralized is therefore best observed at the county level.

Two provinces, Fujian and Yunnan, were chosen based on variations in the economy, geography, and forest policies. Fujian is in the southeastern coastal region of China and has a higher income than Yunnan, which is located in the southwestern inland region. Fujian has abundant plantation forests and commercial timber harvests, whereas Yunnan has abundant natural forests that are under strict conservation. Fujian initiated the CFTR in 2003 and Yunnan followed in 2006. Most regions of the Yunnan Province have been under the Natural Forest Conservation Program (NFCP) since 2001. Natural forests are protected by the NFCP through the banning of timber harvesting in natural forests, shutting down local timber markets, and helping the local forestry industries to transition to other activities (SFA 2000b). At the province level, following a procedure similar to the diversification of cases, two counties in each province were selected. In the Sanming prefecture, Fujian province: County A and County B were selected. Counties C and D were selected in the Chuxiong prefecture of Yunnan province. In each county, two rural communities were identified as fieldwork sites. The basic characteristics of the four cases are shown in Table 1. It should be mentioned that the real names of the counties are coded throughout this study to protect the anonymity of interviewees from the local forestry departments.

Table 1. Basis county characteristics.

Characteristics	Fujian		Yunnan	
	County A	County B	County C	County D
GDP per capita in 2019	9,042	14,888	5,375	2,598
Population in 2019 (thousand individuals)	363	358	434	244
Area	342,500	293,116	353,600	234,300
Total forestland	282,057	254,989	267,999	165,354
Collectively owned forestland	241,307	184,047	245,101	153,432
CCOF	178,000	136,267	150,161	107,444
CFTR initiation year	2003	2003	2006	2006
NFCP	No	No	Yes	Yes

[†] The GDP per capita is deflated by the GDP deflator. The GDP deflator in 2000 is 100. The currency unit has been converted from RMB to USD based on the annual average exchange rate in 2019 (1 USD = 6.8985 RMB).

[‡] The land size unit is the hectare. Land statistics were summarized based on governmental reports of CFTR implementation.

[§] Data source: collection during field work.

We then operationalized the theoretical framework into what should be examined for data collection and analysis. Discourses were reconstructed by analyzing the policy, programmatic, and philosophical ideas of the CFTR and Ecological Civilization. Actors were identified by analyzing the changes in multiple-level governments and non-governmental actors in the four case studies. Based on China's legal framework of forestland ownership, property rights over CCOF were examined by the extent to which recipients of CCOF can obtain their defined forestland (access), harvest timber (withdrawal), design tree plantations (management), exclude others from the use of their forestland (exclusion), and/or transact FUCs (alienation). Discretionary power was examined by analyzing the governmental timber-related regulations and tax rates and by assessing tax sharing from the forestry levy among different government levels. Upward accountability was examined by the extent to which lower-level governments were held accountable to higher-level governments. Downward accountability was examined by the extent to which rural households could hold government-controlled village committees and local governments accountable.

The data were collected between September 2019 and January 2020. Due to COVID-19, a second round of fieldwork was conducted in September 2020. To understand the dynamics of the forest policies, over 700 policy documents were collected during fieldwork and analyzed, covering the period from 2001 to 2019. To further understand the forest policy changes, semi-structured interviews were conducted with forestry department officials, village leaders, rural households, and forestry business actors. Snowball sampling was used to identify the relevant respondents, with a total of 46 interviews being conducted (Table 2). Direct observation was used as a complementary technique to understand rural life and local forest policy practices.

The data analysis was conducted by analyzing the data sets in accordance with our conceptual framework based on the triangulation principle. Qualitative content analysis was used as the main technique. A coding scheme was established in accordance with the theoretical framework. The results were produced by compiling the findings from various data sources including documents, interviews, and observations.

Table 2. List of interviews.

Categories of respondents	County A	County B	County C	County D
Forestry officials	3	3	3	4
Village leaders	3	2	2	2
Rural households	3	5	7	5
Business actors	2	2		
Total	11	12	12	11

RESULTS

Forest devolution from 2003 to 2012

Discourses of CFTR during 2003–2012

The foundational policy idea of the CFTR, as implemented through forestland allocation, FUC certification, and reduced governmental regulations on timber harvest, was to better protect local forestland property rights. This idea was epitomized in the slogan of the CFTR: “mountains entitled, trees protected, citizens reassured” (*shandingquan, shudinggen, rendingxin*), which was expressed by Premier Wen Jiabao (Wen 2009).

The programmatic idea was that the property rights protection could solve the malfunction in forestry production. This malfunction was caused by the complex principal-agent problem in the sector from collective ownership of forestland and top-down government interventions (Li 2008, Zhang et al. 2019). The legal system separated rural households' collective ownership of forestland from the village committee's control over forestland, forcing the village committee to be the agent for rural households. The village committee became the agent of the higher-level government because the party state directly appointed the personnel for the party branch in that committee. Consequently, village committees mandated rural households to meet higher-level government targets for forestry production. Lower-level governments were also mandated by the higher-level governments, while the more central governments became increasingly remote from the local contexts. The incongruent nature of the complex principal-agent problem leads to opportunistic behaviors from all actors (Li 2009, Wen 2009). With new local forestland property rights in place, it is expected that this problem will now be solved.

Philosophical ideas for the CFTR rooted in state neoliberalism stipulated that the government should deregulate the Chinese economy under the leadership of the CCP (So and Chu 2012). State neoliberalism emerged in response to China's economic stagnation, the improvement in Sino–U.S. relations after 1972, and the change in Chinese leadership after 1976. After Mao Zedong passed away, Deng Xiaoping gradually gained the leadership and noticed the necessity to reform the collapsing economy. The aftermath was the dawn of China's marketization reform after 1992 and the uncompromising leadership of the CCP, which are the main features of “state neoliberalism.”

Actors during 2003–2012

The CFTR did not alter the hierarchical and multiple-level structures of the government. At the central level, the SFA continued to lead forest policies. Forestry departments at subnational levels continued top-down policy delivery and implementation. A county forestry department continued to serve

as the primary unit of enforcing forest policies within its jurisdiction. Meanwhile, as village committees were marginalized, rural households and business actors became increasingly active in forestry production and had a new identity, as the “FUC owner.” This identity emerged from the issuance of FUCs after forestland allocation and corresponding legal protections. This change redirected the primary interactions in forest governance from between government actors and village committees, to between government actors and FUC owners.

Property rights during 2003–2012

Rural households were the main recipients of CCOF under the egalitarian principle of the CFTR. In County A, 68% and 26% of CCOF were allocated to rural households and commercialized to business actors, respectively, with 6% remaining vested in village committees. In County B, these percentages were 70%, 20%, and 10%, respectively. In Yunnan, the CFTR followed a more egalitarian principle of allocation because the provincial government stipulated that the proportion of CCOF allocated to rural households should be more than 80%. In County C, 93% and 1% of CCOF were allocated to rural households and commercialized actors, respectively, with 6% remaining unchanged. In County D, these percentages were 93%, 1%, and 6%, respectively. The proportion of commercialized allocations was lower in Yunnan than in Fujian because the NFCP prohibits commercial forestry production.

The withdrawal and management of forest resources were restricted but gradually decreased, given the governmental regulations on timber harvesting. The restrictions on commercial timber harvest were decreased to a greater extent in Fujian than in Yunnan. For management, FUC owners in Fujian had more options for laying out tree plantations than those in Yunnan. An FUC owner could exclude outsiders from access to forestland in the Fujian and Yunnan case studies. Unauthorized intrusion into forestland could be easily identified because rural households frequently communicate with each other. For alienation, an FUC owner might buy, sell, rent in, and rent out forestland, mediated in both cases by the transacting FUC.

Power: discretionary power during 2003–2012

To conserve forests and tax the forestry levy, the government controls the quotas and the technical requirements for timber harvest. A timber logging quota (TLQ) was initially established in 1985. The central government issues TLQs at 5-yr intervals and divides it into annual quotas from a province to every county. Therefore, FUC owners need to apply for quotas prior to harvesting timber (SFA 1999). The government also stipulates a wide range of technical requirements, including the tree species, rotation period, harvest methods, size, and the slope of the forestland where harvesting is taking place. County forestry departments can verify harvest applications by checking cadastral records and delegating official technicians to monitor the harvesting activities.

In Fujian, forest devolution deepened from 2003 onwards, when the provincial government gradually implemented the supporting policies of the CFTR to reduce restrictions on FUC owners’ timber harvest through TLQs. In 2003, the TLQ was abolished for bamboo harvesting. In 2006, harvest for diameters smaller than 5 cm was no longer counted in the TLQs. The unused TLQ quotas for the commercial timber harvest can now be added to

that of the following year. In 2007, the central government approved the provincial government’s plan, authorizing County B to experiment with shifting TLQ control from the harvest volume to the forestland size, which again aimed at reducing the harvest restrictions. In 2009, the provincial government planned to remove all the restrictions on commercial timber harvesting, except for in the context of natural forests. Therefore, harvesting of commercial timber has increased substantially since 2003.

Meanwhile, harvest restrictions on CCOF in Yunnan (Counties C and D) were not reduced as much as in the cases in Fujian. Natural forests are considerably more abundant in Yunnan than in Fujian, and commercial harvesting has been banned since the initiation of the NFCP. Most timber quotas have been only for rural households’ daily use, such as firewood for heating and cooking. If a parcel of CCOF contains non-natural forests, the TLQ restricts commercial harvesting. Therefore, the commercial timber harvest did not increase considerably after the CFTR in Yunnan (Table 3).

Forest devolution was reinforced when the Chinese central government reduced the tax rate for the forestry levy nationwide to reduce the financial burden on FUC owners in the context of forestry production. Before 2010, the tax rate was 20% of the timber price in Fujian Province, and 15% in Yunnan Province. Since 2010, the central government has lowered the tax rate to 10% of the timber price at the national level. Therefore, tax revenues and tax sharing benefits for provincial, prefectural, and county forestry departments declined in the context of all the Fujian and Yunnan case studies (Table 4).

Power: accountability during 2003–2012

The CFTR did not fundamentally change the strong upward accountability of lower to higher level governments. Upward accountability within the one-party government is guaranteed by the CCP’s cadre responsibility system (*ganbu mubiaozerenzhi*). This system is a mechanism to ensure that a cadre, an official in a leadership position in a government, obeys the instructions of a higher-level government. Therefore, lower-level governments need to implement the policies delivered by those at a higher level. The performance of policy implementation is a critical criterion for determining the promotion or punishment of lower-level cadres and also pushes an official to exaggerate a policy impact rather than reporting it realistically (Edin 2003, Birney 2014).

Correspondingly, weak downward accountability is not an anomaly in the CFTR. During fieldwork, several respondents from the forestry departments confirmed that the CFTR did not address top-down policy delivery and implementation. Several rural households did not perceive a change in the top-down hierarchy among county governments, village committees, and rural households due to the CFTR. Only village leaders were aware of the new policies because they were involved in policy implementation tied to the government. Therefore, rural households usually noticed policy changes only when a policy was advocated by village leaders and/or implemented in the village by a local government.

The CFTR, however, indeed improved downward accountability between the government and the FUC owners, leading to moderate political decentralization in Fujian and Yunnan provinces. The county forestry departments became obliged to

Table 3. Trends of commercial timber harvest in four counties.

Year	Fujian province			Yunnan province		
	County A	County B	Policy changes relevant to timber regulation	County C	County D	Policy changes relevant to timber regulation
2001	52596	19024		8431	0	Initiation of the first round of NFCP
2002	131219	95236		0	0	
2003	184479	143371	Initiation of CFTR	5765	0	
2004	230308	194853		7308	0	
2005	247500	204015		0	0	
2006	263172	205852	Trees with diameters smaller than 5 cm no longer counted in TLQs; unused quotas can be rolled over	0	1738	
2007	262915	217622	Experiment to relax TLQ regulations, with County B included	0	1442	Initiation of CFTR
2008	194816	156254		-	2254	
2009	216536	94176		-	1780	
2010	253584	197325		25496	2870	
2011	140173	91191	Restrictions on clearcut harvest; encouragement for selective logging; ban on commercial harvest from natural forests	-	646	Initiation of the second round of NFCP
2012	176186	132482	Demarcation of “Ecological Commercial Forestland”	-	2394	
2013	173013	98026		22912	3664	
2014	182877	84301	Prolonged minimal timber harvest rotations	9020	-	
2015	117246	49381		12871	1906	
2016	128171	98868		12985	1262	
2017	92663	45216		-	1600	
2018	-	-		-	-	
2019	-	-		-	-	

[†] The unit of volume is cubic meters.

[‡] “-” indicates that the corresponding data were not obtained during fieldwork.

[§] The volume of commercial timber harvest in Counties A and B excludes timber harvest by state-owned enterprises, whereas the volume in Counties C and D is not because the state-owned enterprises ceased timber harvesting following the initiation of the NFCP.

^{||} “Policy changes relevant to timber regulation” are summarized based on the policy changes in the Results.

establish a branch office, the FUC service center (*linquan fuwu zhongxin*) to deliver services to FUC owners, including a FUC transaction platform, cadastral registration services, and services to solve FUC owners’ practical problems. In case of misconduct by officials, the FUC owners could resort to administrative litigation to hold the county forestry department accountable. In addition, the CFTR reduced the complex principal-agent problem to some extent and increased the downward accountability of village committees to rural households. After the CFTR, village leaders could no longer make arbitrary decisions on using and transacting forest resources but instead needed to obey households in the case of public forestry affairs.

Table 5 summarizes the dynamics during 2003–2012, with forest devolution being more evident in Fujian than in Yunnan. In addition, moderate political decentralization occurred.

The emergence since 2012 of “recentralized forest devolution”

Discourse shift from collective forest tenure reform to Ecological Civilization since 2012

Forest policy discourses have been shifting since 2012, marked by a prioritization of Ecological Civilization compared with CFTR, although the CFTR did not disappear. Ecological Civilization is neither one discourse nor one policy, but a national agenda integrated into different policy domains (Hanson 2019). Ecological Civilization was first recorded in official documents in 2007 and became part of a high priority national agenda during the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012 (Hansen et al. 2018).

The central government publicized a systemic reform plan for Ecological Civilization in 2015 (CCCCP and State Council 2015). The key idea is to enhance upward accountability in realizing environmental and forest conservation efforts through the cadre responsibility system of the CCP (detailed power changes in section “Power: discretionary power since 2012” and “Power: accountability since 2012”). Therefore, environmental and forest conservation has become a high-priority task in determining promotion and punishment for cadres. If the environment, including the forests, is damaged during the tenure of a cadre’s leadership, he or she will face lifetime responsibility and a demotion in position. The central government issued an assessment approach with regard to the cadre system in 2016, which is a set of quantitative indicators to calculate a performance score, including the size of the forest cover and the forest stock (CCCCP and State Council 2016). Consequently, Ecological Civilization contradicts the CFTR at the level of policy ideas because governments will loathe the FUC owners’ timber harvest, based on their newly acquired property rights, which could impair the forest cover and the forest stock.

Regarding programmatic ideas, tightening upward accountability in environmental conservation could solve the rising social concern about environmental unsustainability, which was driven by a gross domestic product (GDP)-oriented top-down assessment in the cadre responsibility system. The then-member of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP Zhang Gaoli recognized that the GDP-oriented top-down assessment over the last three decades motivated local governments to pursue GDP at the expense of environmental sustainability (Zhang 2013).

Table 4. Tax rate of forestry levy and tax-sharing among governments.

Period	County A and B				County C and D			
	Total tax rate	Province tax sharing	Prefecture tax sharing	County tax sharing	Total tax rate	Province tax sharing	Prefecture tax sharing	County tax sharing
2001–2009	20%	3.2%	2%	14.8%	15%	3%	3%	9%
2010–2015	10%	1%	1.5%	7.5%	10%	2%	2%	6%
2016–	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

However, Ecological Civilization could contradict the CFTR. Tightening upward accountability could strengthen the interventions from central to local governments but could potentially reinvigorate the complex principal-agent problems that occurred prior to the CFTR.

The philosophical ideas of Ecological Civilization are strongly entrenched in “authoritarian environmentalism.” Authoritarian environmentalism envisions that environmental conservation should be regulated under the power and authority vested in the centralized government and society’s obedience to government rulings. Therefore, CCOF becomes a center of contradiction with deregulation under the CFTR vs. regulation under Ecological Civilization (Table 6).

Actors since 2012

As a part of the Ecological Civilization reform, the SFA was renamed the State Forestry and Grassland Administration (SFGA) in 2018 at the central level. The SFGA was vested with the authority to regulate grassland. Despite this change, the hierarchical and multiple-level structures of the government remained unchanged. At the central level, SFGA continued to be responsible for forest policies. At subnational levels, forestry departments of each level continued their top-down policy delivery and implementation. On the other hand, changes in interactions between government actors and FUC owners occurred but varied in Fujian and Yunnan. Notably, in the Fujian cases, the county forestry departments had stronger dominance in their interactions with FUC owners within their jurisdictions as Ecological Civilization strengthened governmental intervention in forest conservation. In the Yunnan cases, such changes were milder because NFCP preceded Ecological Civilization and ensured stable implementation of forest conservation.

Property rights since 2012

The discourse on Ecological Civilization has affected the property rights practices in Fujian, but much less in Yunnan. In either the Fujian or Yunnan case studies, FUC owners did not perceive property rights changes in access, exclusion, and alienation. However, FUC owners in Fujian experienced more restrictions on the withdrawal right. Namely, timber harvest became more restrictive after the provincial government issued policies restricting timber harvesting. Due to these restrictions on timber harvesting, FUC owners in Fujian also experienced further limitations on the management right, such as restrictive tree plantation design. In comparison, FUC owners in Yunnan experienced restrictive but more stable practices of property rights, due to enduring implementation of the NFCP.

During this period, county governments in both Fujian and Yunnan suggested that FUC owners refocus their efforts on withdrawing and managing non-timber forest products (NTFPs).

However, this suggestion has proved to be impractical. The most common valuable NTFPs are wild mushrooms, namely russula in Fujian and matsutake in Yunnan. These wild mushrooms are impossible to cultivate, are only available during the monsoon seasons, and have unpredictable locations. The FUC owners do not require a certificate for mushroom collection, but harvesting is based on who is the “early bird” to race into the mountains early in the morning to undertake the harvest. Cultivable NTFPs generally face uncertain market demands, require a high level of investment, and fall under governmental regulations to protect trees on forestland. Therefore, for most FUC owners, especially those in ordinary rural households, the commercial cultivation of NTFPs has not been a profitable alternative to commercial timber harvesting.

Power: discretionary power since 2012

The restrictive practices of property rights during this period were closely associated with a recentralization trend. In 2011, signs of recentralized forest devolution appeared in Fujian Province for environmental conservation. After the then-President Hu Jintao visited Fujian and encouraged its government to pioneer Ecological Civilization policies, the provincial government restricted clearcut harvesting, encouraged harvesting through selective logging, and banned commercial harvesting from natural forests.

Since 2012, recentralized forest devolution has become more evident in Fujian. In 2012, the provincial government issued the demarcation of “Ecological Commercial Forestland” (*zhongdian shengtaiquwei shangpinlin*) from CCOF in all counties of Fujian Province, without any consent from the FUC owners. If a forestland plot falls into the “Ecological Commercial Forestland” category, timber harvesting becomes restricted for FUC owners, without any (financial) compensation. In 2014, the Fujian provincial government prolonged the minimal timber harvest rotation for Chinese fir (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*) and Chinese red pine (*Pinus tabuliformis*), which are two of the main native species. The Chinese fir rotation cycle was extended from 16 to 26 yr, and the Chinese red pine rotation cycle was extended from 21 to 31 yr. There were also invisible limitations diffused as technical requirements for timber harvesting by FUC owners. These restrictions decreased the amount of commercial timber harvesting in Counties A and B. However, the recentralized forest devolution was relatively inconsequential in Counties C and D in Yunnan because of the ongoing prominence of the NFCP. The second round was implemented in 2011 and predominantly implied the requirement for strict forest conservation. Accordingly, the amount of commercial timber harvested stabilized in Yunnan at a relatively low level (Table 3).

Table 5. Forest policy arrangements (2003–2012 and 2012–2019).

Categories	Period: 2003–2012	Period: 2012–2019
Discourses:		
Policy ideas	Protecting forestland property rights	Tightening upward accountability of lower-level to higher-level governments in environmental conservation
Programmatic ideas	To solve the problem of malfunction in forestry production caused by complex principal-agent problems	To solve environmental unsustainability caused by the GDP-oriented development model through the cadre responsibility system
Philosophical ideas	State neoliberalism: government deregulated economic sectors and markets under the leadership of CCP	Authoritarian environmentalism: environmental conservation regulated under power vested in centralized government
Actors:		
Multiple-level governmental actors	Continuing top-down hierarchy among forestry departments	Continuous: hierarchy of forestry departments
Non-governmental actors	Creating the identity of “FUC owner”; most CCOF re-allocated from village committees to rural households. More active FUC owners from business in Fujian than in Yunnan cases	Continuous: rural households as the majority of FUC owners
Property rights:		
Access	Egalitarian forestland allocation and FUC formalization	No change (compared with 2003–2012)
Withdrawal	Fewer restrictions on timber harvesting with more restrictions reduced in Fujian than in the Yunnan cases	Intensified restrictions on timber harvest in Fujian cases
Management	More options for tree plantation designs by FUC owners with more in Fujian than in Yunnan	Intensified restrictions on tree plantation design in Fujian cases caused by restricting timber harvest
Exclusion	Exclusion of others to enter and use forestland	No change (compared with 2003–2012)
Alienation	Legalized FUC transaction	No change (compared with 2003–2012)
Power:		
Discretionary power	Forest devolution by having fewer timber harvest restrictions for FUC owners and reduced tax rates for forestry levy, which was more pronounced in Fujian than in Yunnan.	Recentralized forest devolution by timber restriction (more pronounced in the Fujian case studies than in the Yunnan case studies); forest devolution by abolishing forestry levy
Accountability	Moderate political decentralization: more governmental services for FUC owners and more downward accountability for village committees to rural households	Political recentralization: intensification of upward accountability through the cadre responsibility system (more pronounced in the Fujian case studies than the Yunnan case studies)

Table 6. Paradoxical discourse of recentralized forest devolution.

Discourse	Contradiction between CFTR and Ecological Civilization
Policy ideas	Cadre’s promotion and punishment (Ecological Civilization) vs. FUC owner’s property rights (CFTR)
Programmatic ideas	Malfunction in forestry production solved by protecting property rights (CFTR) vs. environmental unsustainability solved by government intervention for environmental conservation (Ecological Civilization)
Philosophical ideas	Deregulation (state neoliberalism) vs. re-regulation (authoritarian environmentalism)

Irrespective of these recentralization tendencies, further forest devolution also occurred, now regarding the forestry levy. In 2016, the central government announced the abolition of the forestry levy (see Table 4). This was a supporting policy for the CFTR to reduce the financial burdens for FUC owners. However, the forestry departments were negatively affected and they now had to rely on other financial revenues, such as fiscal redistributions from the upper governments. The benefits of abolition for the FUC owners were also compromised by the increasing restrictions on timber harvesting.

Power: accountability since 2012

Political recentralization occurred by tightening upward accountability for the cadre to realize or at least report the realization of environmental conservation objectives in the context of Ecological Civilization. Since 2012, the central government has prioritized environmental conservation in the cadre responsibility system among other public duties. In 2016,

the central government publicized the systematic assessment approach toward cadres to strengthen their responsibility for environmental conservation and prevent the neglect of these duties. The assessment comprises an annual assessment, a 5-yr periodical assessment, an audit upon the departure of a cadre, and life-long responsibility. Forest cover and the volume of forest stock are two high-priority quantitative indicators for these evaluations.

Respondents from forestry departments in Counties A and B confirmed that forest conservation had become a higher priority since the rise of the Ecological Civilization in 2012. Therefore, the provincial, municipal, and county governments in Fujian became more sensitive to forest cover and stock indicators and initiated restrictions on applications from FUC owners for timber harvesting. Meanwhile, the intensification of upward accountability did not alter the priority of forest conservation in Yunnan. Forest cover and stock have been prioritized since the initiation of the NFCP.

However, the intensification of upward accountability damaged downward accountability between the local governments and the FUC owners, especially in Fujian. Respondents from both county forestry departments and the FUC owners have confirmed that the intensified restrictions on timber harvesting were not built on consultation with or consent from the local FUC owners. Some suffered unexpected financial losses because they received auspicious investment opportunities prior to unexpected and unilateral restrictions. Such financial losses were rare in the Yunnan case studies because the NFCP discouraged FUC owners from investing in forestry.

Table 5 summarizes the policy arrangement dynamics during 2012–2019. Regarding power, recentralized forest devolution featured timber restrictions, whereas political recentralization resulted in tightened upward accountability through the cadre responsibility system. In parallel, some forest devolution was intensified by abolishing the forestry levy in the Fujian and Yunnan case studies.

DISCUSSION

Discussion on the concepts of decentralization and recentralization

Agrawal and Ribot (1999) and Ribot et al. (2006) analyzed decentralization in three dimensions, namely the actors, discretionary power, and accountability. In addition to these dimensions, our framework introduced discourse into the analysis. As shown in our case studies, discourses facilitate revelation of the multilayered ideas of the central government to devolve forest rights to households prior to recentralization, at least in part. Framed under state neoliberalism, the CFTR was initiated to protect property rights for local people to solve the complex principal-agent problem in forestry production. Framed under authoritarian environmentalism, Ecological Civilization tightened upward accountability within multiple-level government arrangements to strengthen environmental conservation. Therefore, the contradictions over CCOF revolved around the prioritization of bottom-up CFTR and top-down Ecological Civilization.

Our framework defines forest devolution as transferring discretionary power from the government to non-governmental actors. In accordance with this definition, recentralized forest devolution is conceptualized as the opposite process of transferring discretionary power from non-governmental actors to the government. By doing so, (recentralized) forest devolution as examined in this paper conforms to the general definition of decentralization and recentralization regarding power, while being distanced from the administrative and political (re) decentralization.

Our analysis emphasizes and explicates the association between power and property rights. Relaxed restrictions on property rights accompanied decentralization of power from 2003 to 2012, whereas its reversal occurred since 2012. Our analysis echoes that of Rawls (2001) who highlighted the association between property rights and power. The widespread dispersal of property in Rawlsian “property-owning democracy” or “liberal democratic socialism” guarantees equal citizen participation in the power process, whereas the concentration of property could not offer the same guarantee. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) added that inclusive power is a necessity for property rights protection. However, only a few studies in the literature on forest decentralization have attempted to link property rights with power (Thanh and Sikor 2006, Sikor and Lund 2009, Mohammed and Inoue 2014). Our analysis suggests that in future studies, these two concepts could be more closely associated.

Discussion on the decentralization and recentralization in the southern provinces of China

In the literature, two general types of forest devolution have been identified, namely community empowerment and household empowerment (Edmunds and Wollenberg 2003). Devolution to households has been observed particularly often in China (Xu

and Hyde 2019, Yiwen et al. 2020) and Vietnam (Thanh and Sikor 2006, Dang et al. 2018, Thuy et al. 2021). Our case analyses demonstrate why forest devolution in the southern provinces of China has resulted in the empowerment of households. Village committees have been at the distal end of the centralized top-down hierarchy in China, with all levels being tied to the government. Before the CFTR, the complex principal-agent problem led to malfunctioning forestry production. To solve this problem, the empowerment of village committees would, therefore, be senseless because these were part and parcel of the problem. Instead, the empowerment of households, mediated through property rights reform, was the most effective alternative to break through this principal-agent problem.

Next, some researchers have also noticed a trend of recentralization to intensify environmental conservation in China (Kostka and Nahm 2017, Mao and Zhang 2018). Our analysis has tailored the discussion of recentralization to the forest governance domain. The recentralized forest devolution unfolded into restrictions being tightened for timber harvesting. The FUC owners’ property rights remained valid in name but became more restricted in practice. In addition to recentralized forest devolution, intensified upward accountability within the cadre responsibility system triggered political recentralization, damaging the downward accountability of the government to FUC owners in jurisdictions. Despite the abolition of the forestry levy in 2016, the benefits to FUC owners were compromised by the restrictions on timber harvests.

Divergence prior to 2012 and convergence after 2012 was observed among the Fujian and Yunnan case studies. Before 2012, the Fujian case studies showed more pronounced forest devolution, whereas in the Yunnan case studies it was less pronounced due to the implementation of the NFCP in 2001. This observation corroborates previous studies on the CFTR in these two provinces (Zhao et al. 2008, Kong and Du 2009, Yin et al. 2013). After 2012, the Fujian case studies showed more pronounced recentralization tendencies, whereas the Yunnan case studies remained relatively stable. In addition to recent findings on recentralization under the discourse of Ecological Civilization (Kostka and Nahm 2017, Lo 2020), our observations add that recentralization is likely to be uneven in different regions and more intensive in regions that were more decentralized prior to 2012. Therefore, our analysis suggests that future research on the CFTR should be cautious in the context of regional and temporal variations rooted in changing policy priorities and specific regional contexts.

Some debate in the academic literature has arisen on whether and how recentralization can improve environmental conservation (Phelps et al. 2010, Wainwright and Mann 2013, Kostka and Nahm 2017). Based on our case studies, we recognize that strengthening upward accountability could create institutional incentives for multiple-level governments to enhance environmental conservation. However, several uncertainties remain. Regarding CCOF’s function for timber supply, restrictions on timber production may impose a burden on other countries. Recentralization may invigorate another complex principal-agent problem through which local actors become upwardly accountable to the remote central government. Timber restrictions and the abolition of the forestry levy may also prohibit the financing of forest conservation. Therefore, researchers should continue to observe the dynamics of recentralization in the Chinese forest sector.

CONCLUSION

This paper presents an inclusive framework for analyzing decentralization and recentralization and applies it to analyzing two southern provinces of China. A decentralization trend was observed following the initiation of the CFTR in 2003. After 2012, a recentralization trend emerged with the rise of the Ecological Civilization discourse in China, although the legacy of the CFTR was partially maintained. Our analysis provides two implications for forest governance and might invite follow-up research. First, discourses, actors, property rights, and power interweave with each other during decentralization and recentralization processes. Second, different decentralization and recentralization types may occur concurrently or sequentially. In particular, recentralization, as an approach to pursuing conservation objectives, may reverse decentralization, but its performance remains uncertain.

Data Availability:

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because they contain confidential information about governmental policies and information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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