

## **Water Allocation and Desertification in Northwestern China from a Social Science Perspective**

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**Abstract.** This paper examines how changes in land tenure and taxation policies created underdevelopment in the region worst affected by desertification in China: the Minqin oasis in the Gansu province. I argue that the tragedy of the commons occurred due to the significant over extraction of tax revenue, driven by central-local tensions embedded in a tax farming system. My findings show that the institutional disarray in the 1980s created a fiscal crisis that pushed the central government to decentralize public goods provisions. The disruption of productive relations reduced the institutional credibility of land rights among the peasantry and, together with the ever-increasing need to accumulate capital for industrialized farming, created the corporatist state in the ecological catastrophe. The data came from an 18 month-long ethnography, 154 oral history interviews, and 7,237 policy documents gathered from provincial and county record offices in northwestern China.