

# Ethical Dilemmas in Ecological Governance in the China-Mongolia Cross-Border Region and the Chinese Approach

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the ethical dilemmas in ecological governance in the China-Mongolia cross-border region and proposes a Chinese approach to address these challenges. From the dual perspectives of ecopolitics and ethics of responsibility, this analysis delves into the ethical dilemmas of cross-border ecological governance, encompassing the structural imbalance in the allocation of ecological responsibilities, the uneven and asymmetrical risks associated with technology transfer, the institutional absence within cross-border ecological governance mechanisms, and the multiple dilemmas of ethical choices across different time scales. Deconstructing the governance logic and pathway of the Chinese approach involves critically addressing “ethical dilemmas” and constructing the Chinese solution through innovative breakthroughs in domestic ecological space governance institutional experiments and international collaborative governance pathways, both of which are framed within the theoretical framework of ecological civilization thinking.

**Keywords:** China-Mongolia cross-border region; Ecological governance; Ethical dilemmas; Chinese approach

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## 1. From the Dual Perspectives of Ecological Politics and Ethics of Responsibility, the Ethical Dilemmas of Ecological Governance in the China-Mongolia Cross-border Region

In today's international community, both China and Mongolia face many common ecological and environmental issues. In the context of ecological governance in the China-Mongolia cross-border region, there are structural imbalances in the allocation of ecological responsibilities, colonization risks associated with technology transfer, institutional gaps in cross-border ecological governance mechanisms, and ethical dilemmas in making decisions balancing immediate and long-term interests.

### (1) The structural imbalance dilemma in the allocation of ecological responsibilities

China and Mongolia are geographically contiguous, yet the inherent asymmetry of their geography and ecosystems, coupled with differences in geopolitical perceptions, has created a significant structural imbalance dilemma in terms of ecological responsibilities and rights in the cross-border region between the two countries.

#### 1) The geography and ecosystem of the region exhibit inherent asymmetry

The geography and ecosystems of China and Mongolia exhibit natural asymmetry, with one aspect being the issue of cross-border water resource allocation and utilization. As an upstream country, Mongolia's rivers such as the Kherlen River and the Onon River are crucial to the ecology and agriculture of Northeast China. These grassland rivers, originating in Mongolia and flowing through China, have well-developed wetlands and abundant forage resources along their banks. Especially in the downstream areas of the Kherlen River and the Onon River, the soil nutrient properties are favorable for agricultural cultivation. Therefore, Mongolia's water resource development will

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also impact the water quantity and quality in downstream China.

Another aspect of the natural asymmetry in the geography and ecosystems of China and Mongolia lies in the issue of grassland degradation and land desertification. Due to reasons such as disorderly mining of opencast coal mines and overgrazing by herdsmen, the grassland degradation problem in Mongolia has become increasingly severe, resulting in a more fragile grassland ecosystem in the cross-border areas between China and Mongolia that relies on it for survival.

In cross-border ecological governance between the two countries, Mongolia highly relies on foreign support in terms of funding and technology for governance. As a result, when facing ecological and environmental issues, China has undertaken more responsibilities in cross-border governance by relying on projects such as the "Three North Shelterbelt Forest Program (*Sanbei fanghulin* 三北防护林)". How to establish a pathway for large-scale cross-border engineering governance between China and Mongolia poses a significant challenge among the structural imbalance of geography and ecosystems.

## **2) Ethical disagreements arising from cognitive differences in geopolitical perspectives between China and Mongolia**

China and Mongolia also have significant differences in their perceptions of geopolitics. On the Chinese side, the government actively pursues an open approach along the border and has invested heavily in border transportation facilities, such as roads and railways, to improve and complete them.

However, on the Mongolian side, the infrastructure in border areas is relatively underdeveloped, and border port facilities are also relatively backward, undoubtedly posing obstacles to China-Mongolian cross-border ecological governance practices. The deep meaning of Mongolia's "Third Neighbor (*Disan linguo* 第三邻国)" foreign strategy is its natural vigilance towards China and Russia, which has led to the politicization of cross-border ecological governance.

The cognitive differences in geopolitics, which create asymmetry between the two countries, not only limit the progress of ecological governance in their cross-border regions but also lead to disagreements between China and Mongolia over the sharing of responsibilities.

## **(2) The dilemma of addressing the risks of imbalance and asymmetry arising from the transfer of governance technology**

In the context of ecological governance in the China-Mongolia cross-border region, the imbalance in technology transfer and the asymmetry among regions due to the technological capability gap have both become ethical dilemmas faced by the two countries in addressing ecological issues and in technology transfer. Technology transfer is often influenced by various factors, including the level of economic development, technological innovation capabilities, policy environment, and other considerations. The technology provided by developed countries or regions is not fully adaptable to the natural conditions and social and economic background of the China-Mongolia cross-border region.

Of course, the technology transfer in ecological governance should not only consider the advancement of technology but also assess the feasibility of technological adaptability and localization in the China-Mongolia cross-border region. On the Chinese side, with the continuous deepening of reform and opening-up, China has gained relative advantages in environmental protection technology. China hopes to transfer these ecological governance technologies to Mongolia to assist in its ecological governance efforts. However, due to limitations in funding, talent, and other aspects, Mongolia faces difficulties in effectively absorbing and utilizing these technologies. Especially in the China-Mongolia cross-border region, due to poor natural conditions such as climate, soil, and vegetation, as well as uneven social and economic development, ecological governance technologies that have proven effective in China, such as desertification control and sand fixation, may not be applicable in Mongolia. This

has led to ineffective technology transfer and even negative impacts.

### **(3) In the China-Mongolia cross-border ecological governance mechanism, the dilemma of institutional deficiencies exists**

The ecological governance in the China-Mongolia cross-border region requires both governments to jointly establish a clear cooperation framework. The dilemma of institutional deficiencies is mainly manifested in conflicts in the convergence of legal policies between the two countries. This is because there are differences between China and Mongolia in terms of legal policies, specifically manifested in the imbalance of institutions related to environmental protection laws and regulations, standard systems, regulatory mechanisms, and other aspects between the two countries. China emphasizes the principle that whoever causes pollution should be responsible for its treatment. However, Mongolia has relatively weak enforcement capabilities when it comes to environmental laws and lacks mechanisms for cross-border law enforcement, which results in significant limitations in the understanding of ecological responsibilities and rights between China and Mongolia.

### **(4) In the context of the timeliness issue between long-term and short-term interests, one faces ethical dilemmas in making choices**

The predicament Mongolia encounters in its development decisions is firmly grounded in the twin conflicts between its geographical economy structure and ecological vulnerability. As a nation abundant in resources, mining constitutes a key industry in Mongolia, and the exploitation of resources and associated sectors have become the backbone of Mongolia's economy. Confronted with environmental problems stemming from mining, such as river contamination and grassland damage, as well as the clash between lasting ecological benefits and short-term economic gains, the Mongolian government is in a quandary: whether to prioritize economic stability or ecological preservation.

There are two main contradictions. Firstly, it is difficult for China to directly regulate the exploitation of resources near the China-Mongolia border within Mongolia. Secondly, China needs to import mineral resources from Mongolia. These dual contradictions have led to a conflict in prioritizing development over ecological protection in the cross-border areas within Mongolia.

## **2. The Governance Approach of China's Plan for Ecological Management in the China-Mongolia Cross-border Region--a Critical Response and Solution Construction to the Previously Mentioned "Ethical Dilemma"**

In the new era, how China provides a critical response and constructs solutions to the "ethical dilemma" has become a key focus in the ecological governance of the China-Mongolia cross-border region.

### **(1) The concept of ecological civilization has enabled the reconstruction of the theoretical framework**

#### **1) The concept of "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets (Lvshui qingshan jiushi jinshan yinshan 绿水青山就是金山银山)" (Two Mountains Theory) represents an innovative development of Marxist ecological ideas**

In the cross-border regions between China and Mongolia, we should recognize the immense value of "Two Mountains Theory" to the local area as well as the entire ecosystem. The level of awareness and emphasis placed by residents, businesses, and governments in cross-border regions on ecological environmental protection, as well as how to foster a collective participation atmosphere across society for ecological governance and protection, will be the focus of constructing this concept.

To combat desertification in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China has strengthened cooperation with Mongolia based on the concept of "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets"; China has cooperated

with countries such as Russia, Mongolia, Laos, and Vietnam to establish cross-border nature reserves and ecological corridors<sup>[1]</sup>. Cross-border nature reserves are established to safeguard the stability of ecosystems such as cross-border rivers, lakes, and grasslands.

## **2) The shift towards responsibility ethics in the concept of “a community with a shared future for mankind”**

In the face of today's global ecological crisis, it is essential to establish an international perspective, as no country can remain unaffected or solve the problem alone. In the ecological governance of the China-Mongolia cross-border region, how to transcend differences in geography, ethnicity, race, culture, and systems, and promote the formation of a consensus and actions for regional ecological governance, so that the ecological environment in the China-Mongolia cross-border region moves towards balanced and stable development, is a responsibility that China needs to undertake.

The “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” emphasizes the dialectical unity between economic development and ecological balance. In the ecological governance of the China-Mongolia cross-border region, China has been practicing a balanced approach to economic and ecological relations, promoting a comprehensive green transformation path for both economy and ecology.

## **(2) Domestic institutional experiments in ecological space governance: Establishing an ecological protection system and delineating ecological protection zones**

### **1) The three-north shelterbelt forest program system**

Starting from 1978, China has successively implemented shelterbelt projects in the “Three-North” regions of Northeast, North, and Northwest China, constructing large-scale artificial forestry ecosystems. “The project covers 13 provinces and autonomous regions, with a total construction area of 4,069,000 square kilometers, accounting for 42.4% of China's total land area... The project planning spans from 1978 to 2050, covering a period of 73 years<sup>[2]</sup>. The Three-North regions are precisely located in the cross-border area between China and Mongolia. The Three-North Shelterbelt Forest Program is a wise experimental ecological governance initiative in China that follows the principle of “controlling the area through lines (Yixian daimian 以线带面)”. It has achieved remarkable results and provided valuable experience.

### **2) The projects of returning grazing land to grassland and returning farmland to forest**

China has implemented the projects of returning farmland to forest (*Tuigeng huanlin* 退耕还林) and returning grazing land to grassland (*Tuimu huancao* 退牧还草) in severely degraded grassland areas in the northwest, adjusting the structure of agriculture and animal husbandry as a means of ecological governance to enhance ecological coordination in the northwest. The projects of returning farmland to forest and returning grazing land to grassland are not merely about withdrawing from farming and grazing; they also involve implementing a compensation mechanism at the same time. Through these projects, the government provides subsidies free of charge to farmers and herdsman facing financial difficulties. The compensation mechanism is used to guide herdsman to reduce grazing intensity and restore grassland vegetation.

## **(3) Pathway for international collaborative governance: innovation and breakthrough guided by cooperation and exchange**

For some regions in the China-Mongolia cross-border area that heavily rely on resource extraction, it is even more necessary to mitigate conflicts through regional cooperation and transformation.

### **1) Strengthen humanistic exchanges between China and Mongolia, and jointly build a community of ecological cognition**

China encourages exchanges and cooperation among non-governmental organizations, enterprises, and

individuals to jointly promote ecological governance in cross-border regions. This includes China encouraging local herdsmen in Mongolia to participate in ecological protection and ideally transition into roles as ecological rangers. Because in China's pastoral areas "by creating public welfare positions for ecological protection, the participation of herdsmen in protecting the ecological environment has significantly increased"<sup>[3]</sup>. Using this model to enhance public awareness of ecological governance.

## **2) Promote cooperation on implementing cross-border ecological governance projects**

The Daur International Nature Reserve is a significant project in the cooperation on cross-border ecological governance initiatives. In 1994, through a joint agreement among the governments of China, Mongolia, and Russia, the Hulun Lake Nature Reserve, in conjunction with Mongolia's Daur Nature Reserve and Russia's Daursky Nature Reserve, established the "CMR Daur International Protected Area", becoming China's first transnational nature reserve. The establishment of the CMR Daur International Protected Area has effectively protected the natural environment of the Daur grassland region while promoting exchanges and cooperation in cross-border areas.

## **3. Breakthroughs in the Ethical Values of China's Approach: China's Transcendence and Reconstruction Beyond the 20th-Century Global Ecological and Environmental Historical Perspective**

In the contest between ecological environment and economic development, China's approach to ecological governance in the cross-border region with Mongolia has achieved a breakthrough in ethical values.

### **(1) Balancing the interests of both current and future generations: The transcendence of the Chinese approach**

In the values of Western capitalism, economic growth and material prosperity are the goals. Since the Industrial Revolution, humans have extensively exploited natural resources and emitted pollutants, leading to frequent issues such as global warming and biodiversity loss. Facing environmental issues that have transcended national borders, China has long recognized the global nature of these problems and has begun to promote ecological governance through cooperation. By emphasizing ecological civilization construction and the "Belt and Road (Yidai yilu 一带一路)" Initiative, China seeks to balance the interests of both current and future generations, which constitutes a proven and successful practice in China for jointly addressing these challenges.

China's approach to ecological governance in the cross-border regions with Mongolia involves establishing cross-border nature reserves, converting farmland to forests, and restoring grazing land to grassland, among other ecological projects, which have fostered green development patterns and lifestyles. This not only balances the interests of current and future generations but also contributes Chinese wisdom and strength to building a community with a shared future for mankind, thereby transcending the 20th-century Western capitalist perspective on global ecological and environmental history.

### **(2) Balance the interests of strong and weak groups and safeguard the interests of vulnerable groups**

When formulating policies for ecological and environmental protection in cross-border regions, the Chinese government fully considers the interests of vulnerable groups. Through the implementation of an ecological compensation mechanism within the projects of restoring grazing land to grassland and converting farmland to forests, economic compensation is provided to local farmers and herdsmen who have suffered losses due to ecological and environmental protection, ensuring that their basic livelihoods are not affected. Meanwhile, in order to enhance the self-development capacity of vulnerable groups, China actively provides advanced ecological protection methods to farmers and herdsmen in Mongolia within the framework of bilateral ecological cooperation and governance. By imparting practical technologies such as water-saving irrigation and pest control, China

helps improve agricultural production efficiency among these groups and reduce their over-reliance on natural resources.

### **(3) Overall balance between humans and nature**

The Chinese approach to ecological governance in the cross-border regions between China and Mongolia represents a breakthrough in ethical values, with the core aim of correcting human-centered in order to achieve an overall balance between humans and nature. China's practice in ecological governance in cross-border areas is a call for both China and Mongolia to jointly address cross-border ecological and environmental issues. China strives to promote international cooperation in ecological governance, aiming to advance joint economic development while engaging in ecological governance in cross-border areas, and to achieve harmonious coexistence between humans and nature on a broader scale. Through these efforts, China seeks to truly reconstruct the global ecological and environmental historical perspective of the 20th century and realize an overall balance between humans and nature.

## **4. A Revolution from Regional Practice to a New Form of Human Ecological Civilization**

China's approach to ecological governance in the cross-border areas between China and Mongolia has achieved a revolution from regional practice to a new form of human ecological civilization. It has resolved the binary opposition between economy and ecology, presenting the revolutionary outcome of humanity's transition from industrial civilization to ecological civilization. In the context of international ecological governance, it has realized a transformation towards "non-human-centered" and institutional innovation based on the Chinese approach. This demonstrates China's influence in global cross-border regional governance. The Chinese approach provides a blueprint for constructing a regional ecological model.

### **(1) The Chinese approach has resolved the conflict between economy and ecology**

From 1964 onwards, the "Eight Principles for China's Foreign Economic and Technical Assistance (*Zhongguo duiwai jingjijishuyuanzhu baxiang yuanze* 中国对外经济技术援助八项原则)". Since then, China has begun to provide economic and technical assistance to other countries, emphasizing the actual needs of the recipient countries to ensure the practical effectiveness of the technical assistance. Of course, China's assistance to Mongolia is not limited to technology alone; it also encompasses funding, personnel, management expertise, and various other aspects.

China's practices in the cross-border regions between China and Mongolia have promoted continuous improvement in the ecological environment. These practices have not only resolved the previous dual opposition between humans and nature in terms of harmonious development, but also addressed the dual conflict between economic interests and ecological protection.

### **(2) The revolution from industrial civilization to ecological civilization**

The Chinese approach to ecological governance in the cross-border regions between China and Mongolia aims to achieve a revolution from industrial civilization to ecological civilization from multiple perspectives.

Structurally speaking, the Chinese approach, on the other hand, focuses on the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. China shifts away from the Western mindset of nature serving humanity and transitions towards a new mindset that views humans and nature as a community. As a result, the Chinese approach achieves a breakthrough. Methodologically speaking, before cooperative governance, ecological governance between China and Mongolia faced numerous obstacles, with a single domestic regulation approach dominating on both sides. The Chinese approach focuses on cross-border regional governance, transitioning from a singular model to a diversified model, achieving a reconstruction of methodology. In terms of the contradiction between long-term and



short-term interests, Western industrial civilization focuses on short-term rapid economic growth. In contrast, the Chinese approach breaks this contradiction, achieving a balance between time horizons and ecological governance. From the perspective of technological change, the Chinese approach gradually diminishes the influence of Western colonialism formed around the 20th century. Through the mode of technological cooperation, it achieves technological upgrades by replacing old technologies with new ones, completing technological breakthroughs and transformations. In terms of cultural patterns, the Chinese approach discards the “Western-dominated” viewpoint that has emerged since Western industrial civilization, and establishes a novel form of human civilization marked by the harmonious coexistence of diverse civilizations. Instead of merely copying Western social structures and values, it accomplishes profound transformation within the realm of cultural patterns.

Table 1. The Revolutionary Model from Industrial Civilization to Ecological Civilization

Patterns and pathways	Revolutionary target	Revolutionary outcome
self-resolution	human-centered	harmonious coexistence between humans and nature
methodological reconstruction	single regulation	diversified governance
balance between time and economy	short-term rapid development	long-term coordination
technological transformation	colonialism	technological cooperation
transformation of civilizational forms	Western-centric theory	coexistence of civilizations

### (3) “Decentralization” in international ecological governance

The Chinese approach advocates for a more inclusive ecological governance system. In practical governance, especially when balancing the respective practical needs of cross-border areas between two countries, China challenges the Western colonialist approach by adopting locally grown methods, thereby weakening to the greatest extent the rigid Western discourse structure that has been solidified since the 20th century. Based on this, China explores diverse pathways that cater to countries with various systems, enabling a common approach in global ecological governance. Both China and Mongolia are developing countries, and China’s approach lies more in seeking ways to break out of the colonialist framework dominated by Western discourse.

This represents a transformation from the “unidirectional output” of the Western discourse system to a “coexistence” where humans and nature coexist harmoniously, with the aim of achieving “Decentralization” within the international ecological governance system.

### (4) Lies in the construction of ecological governance methods in regional governance

China, capitalizing on its institutional prowess in marshaling resources to tackle significant undertakings, efficiently amasses resources and harmonizes the interests of diverse stakeholders via comprehensive planning from above and stratified collaboration.” China and Mongolia, as signatories to the Paris Agreement and joint initiators of the Belt and Road Green Development Partnership Initiative, are committed to jointly addressing global climate change and deepening international cooperation on ecology and the environment. This not only aligns with the development directions of both countries but also serves the fundamental interests of their peoples.”<sup>[4]</sup>

Certainly, the Chinese approach also aims to break the ingrained mindset of “pollute first, treat later” in ecological governance and to reconstruct the discourse system of world development. It not only ensures economic growth for developing countries such as China and Mongolia but also achieves the effect of transitioning from regional ecological governance to overall ecological harmony. The practical model of ecological governance in the cross-border regions between China and Mongolia, from the perspective of ecological governance, has reorganized the international order, demonstrated the influence of socialist countries in the new era, and ultimately proposed a solution for global development patterns.

## 5. Conclusion

The Chinese approach to ecological governance in the China-Mongolia cross-border region is breaking through the ethical dilemmas of ecological governance and achieving a value breakthrough for the Chinese solution. This demonstrates the global significance of the Chinese approach, extending from regional practices to a revolution in the new form of human ecological civilization.

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