



# ECOLOGICAL MIGRATION

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN CHINA

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## Environmental policy and ecological migration

### *Background to the emergence of ecological migration*

It was the indigenous ethnic inhabitants of the remote regions, those traditionally engaged in raising livestock that bore the brunt of the negative legacy of this change in agricultural practice. Under the pretext of restoring and conserving degraded ecological environments, the Chinese government launched a campaign of “ecological migration”, under which indigenous inhabitants were pressured to leave what little land they had left, and migrate elsewhere.

“Ecological migration” has been effectively practiced since the 1980s, long before the large-scale campaign was initiated. In one district in the southern mountains of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, designated by the state as a “specially poor district”, severe environmental degradation made it difficult for the inhabitants to subsist. Since 1982, under the guidance of the national government, the inhabitants were encouraged to migrate from the region. This marked the beginning of the practice of “ecological migration” in China. The measure, adopted at Ningxia, was introduced in other “specially poor districts” from 1986. The efficacy and necessity of the policy of “ecological migration”, which was originally aimed at the eradication of poverty, gradually became widely accepted by the people (Li Ning et al. 2003).

From the end of 2004 more than 50 scientific papers on the subject of “ecological migration” have been published, and many academic dissertations have also taken up “ecological migration” as a theme (Meng Linlin 2004; Hu Huazheng 2004). The term “ecological migration” was coined in a scientific paper in 1993 within the context of the migration associated Sanxia Dam. Although the paper does not necessarily define the term clearly, the concept of “ecologic migration” was proposed as a solution to the problems of a deteriorating ecological environment and increasing population pressure (Ren et al. 1993).

In the early years of its promotion, in addition to ecological conservation, the objectives of “ecological migration” included poverty eradication and the promotion of dam construction. It has only been since 2000 that the main focus of the policy has been that of ecological conservation and numerous reports on the policy have been presented to the public through newspaper articles under the title “ecological migration”. Two examples

are the migration from the Shennongjia Nature Reserve, established for the protection of rare wildlife (Zheng 2000), and the migration of herders from Alasha League in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Wulantuya 2000).

This was the exactly the same time that the West Development Project was initiated. One motivation for this project was the need to address the degradation of ecosystems. According to Du Ping, three factors directly contributed to the establishment of the West Development Project, namely the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the massive flooding of the Changjiang Valley in 1998, which resulted in more than 200 billion yuan of direct damage, and the storms of yellow sand in 1999 that caused severe damage over large areas of inland China (Du et al. 2004: 17).

In short, these ecological environmental problems inevitably became one of the main concerns of the West Development Project. The five pillars of the West Development Project policy mentioned in China's 10th five-year plan (2001–2005), released in March 2001, were: (1) Acceleration of infrastructure construction; (2) Improvement and maintenance of ecological environments; (3) Coordination and rationalization of industrial structure; (4) Development of scientific technology and education; (5) Deepening of reforms and further opening up to the outside world. Of these priorities, the central government is stressing the importance of (1) and (2) and has assigned them as tasks deserving the highest priority (Onishi 2004: 48).