

# Ecological Migration and Cultural Preservation: A Comparative Study of the Tuvan and Evenki Indigenous Groups in China

Andrew Li

*Tsinghua International School, Zhongguancun North Rd. Haidian, Beijing 100084 People's Republic of China*

**Keywords:** Ecological Migration, Cultural Preservation, Displacement, Tuvan, Evenki.

**Abstract:** Ecological migration driven by climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation has become a pressing global issue, posing severe challenges to the cultural traditions and identities of indigenous communities. This research focuses on the displacement of local residents due to the establishment of protected areas, using two indigenous groups in China—the Tuvan and the Evenki—as case studies. Through comparative analysis, it explores the impact of protected area development on their ecological migration and cultural heritage. The settled Tuvan community faced relocation due to the development of a natural park, disrupting their farming and herding practices. However, the boom in tourism provided new economic opportunities, allowing them to adapt while striving to protect their cultural identity. In contrast, the nomadic Evenki faced an existential threat to their way of life, as deforestation, mining, and hunting restrictions within nature reserves severely limited their traditional subsistence methods and mobility. The case studies highlight the different challenges and coping strategies of settled and nomadic indigenous groups, as well as the government's varying approaches to economic development, biodiversity conservation, and cultural preservation. While the Tuvan actively embraced tourism, the Evenki struggled to maintain their identity amid strict environmental policies. This research delves into the complex relationship between ecological migration, protected area development, and indigenous cultural heritage, providing policy recommendations for balancing these intersecting priorities. It emphasizes the need for meaningful engagement with indigenous communities, co-developed plans, and holistic solutions that reconcile environmental, economic, and cultural sustainability goals.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, ecological migration has become an increasingly prominent global issue. Due to climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation, many communities have been forced to leave their traditional homelands and migrate to new habitats. This forced ecological migration not only impacts people's livelihoods and lifestyles, but also poses a severe challenge to their cultural traditions and identity. China's policy approach to ecological migration appears to be an attempt to address two objectives concurrently: promoting rural development and restoring the eco-environment, through a single policy initiative (Li et al., 2014).

This research focuses on a special but increasingly common situation in ecological migration: the displacement of local residents for the establishment of protected areas. The creation of protected areas aims to protect endangered species

and their habitats, as well as maintain biodiversity. However, this often directly conflicts with the subsistence rights of indigenous peoples. On one hand, protected areas bring economic opportunities and infrastructure development to local communities; on the other hand, being forced to leave their homeland has a tremendous impact on the residents' cultural identity and way of life.

Using two indigenous ethnic groups in China—the Tuvan and the Evenki—as case studies, this paper explores the impact of protected area development on their ecological migration and culture. Although geographically close, the two groups face different challenges and coping strategies due to their different lifestyles. Through comparative analysis, this research aims to delve into the complex relationship between ecological migration, protected area development, and indigenous cultural heritage, and to provide policy recommendations for the future.

## 2 THE TUVAN

The Tuvan is a settled ethnic group, mainly engaged in farming and animal husbandry. They have their own religion that is closely attached to nature, with the Shaman taking a fundamental role of connecting the people and the spirits. even in the present day, the Tuvan people firmly believe in the ability of their shamans to mete out punishment for actions that show ingratitude towards nature (Amalbekova and Shagimgereyeva, 2023). They have lived for generations in villages and have a deep emotional attachment to the local land and natural resources. Tuvan are one of the many extremely small ethnic populations residing within China, who are striving to preserve their distinct identity despite being surrounded by the vastly dominant Han Chinese populace as well as the considerable demographic influences of Kazakh and Mongolian communities (Mawkaunli, 2001). In recent years, with the government's efforts to develop tourism, some Tuvan villages have been incorporated into nature reserves, forcing many residents to relocate.

During the 20th century, to revive the economy and attract tourism investment, the Chinese government launched a series of tourism development projects, including the Bai Ha Ba Natural Park along the Ha Ba River. The park encompasses not only cultural landscapes like prehistoric rock art sites but also the traditional residential areas of the Tuvan. To establish the scenic area, the government forced local villagers to relocate to new residential areas outside the river valley.

This move dealt a heavy blow to the Tuvan community. On one hand, they had a profound emotional bond with the villages and lands where their ancestors had lived for hundreds of years, and being forced to leave their homes caused them great spiritual trauma. Conversely, their original farming and herding practices were also severely disrupted, and the villagers had to adapt to the new living environment. In addition, they confront an immense challenge in utilizing and sustaining their native language, as the Chinese government does not officially acknowledge them as one of the recognized ethnic nationalities within the People's Republic of China (Mawkaunli, 2001).

However, with the boom of the tourism industry, a large number of tourists began flocking to the Ha Ba River area, bringing new economic opportunities to the Tuvan community. Some Tuvan started working in the tourism service industry, earning income by selling handicrafts, performing traditional songs and dances, and other means-a concept known as 'culture brokering', where the Tuvan, the 'hosts', use various methods to allow the tourists, the 'guests',

to better understand their culture (Yang, Ryan and Zhang, 2014). Meanwhile, the local government also invested in improving infrastructure such as roads, water supply, and electricity, improving the living conditions of the residents.

Nevertheless, tourism development has also had some negative impacts on the Tuvan's cultural identity and way of life. Turning Tuvan villages into "living fossil" tourist attractions has led to the commodification and objectification of their culture, weakening its vitality. Additionally, the influx of outsiders has exacerbated cultural clashes, threatening the transmission of the Tuvan's language, customs, and values. It is an unfortunate fact that the traditional Tuvan culture is currently undergoing an irreversible decline and gradual elimination of certain artistic expressions and practices. Activities like manufacturing saddles, bridles, utensils, traditional attire and footwear are all fading away, as well as the disappearance of certain folklore genres and etiquette traditions (Kuzhuget, 2018).

Overall, tourism development in the Ha Ba River area has had a double-edged impact on the Tuvan community. On one hand, it has provided residents with new sources of income and improved living environments; on the other hand, being forced to leave their homes and the commodification of their culture have posed challenges and impacts to their traditional way of life and identity. Despite this, the Tuvan have relatively adapted to these changes, actively embracing tourism development while also striving to protect their culture.

## 3 THE EVENKI

The Evenki is a nomadic ethnic group, mainly living by hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding. They have roamed for generations in the forest regions of northeastern Siberia and northeastern China, living in harmony with nature. Over the course of coexisting harmoniously with the natural environment for an extended period, the Evenki people have formulated an intricate system of beliefs that governs their interactions with nature. At the core of their cultural traditions lies the practice of "Shamanism", similar to that of the Tuvan, which facilitates communication between humans and spiritual entities with the objective of garnering their goodwill, inspiring favourable outcomes, and counteracting detrimental occurrences (Zamaraeva et al., 2019). However, in recent years, due to forest resource exploitation and the establishment of protected areas, the Evenki's traditional territories have been continuously encroached upon, and the space for reindeer herding has become increasingly limited, severely threatening

their traditional way of life. The decline of wild reindeer populations represents more than just a loss of biodiversity; it also signifies the erosion of cultural and linguistic richness, as well as a threat to food security for certain communities (Mustonen et al., 2021).

Unlike the settled Tuvan, the nomadic Evenki face an even more daunting survival predicament. Since the 20th century, due to large-scale forest exploitation and the establishment of nature reserves, the Evenki's traditional territories have been continuously encroached upon and destroyed, making their nomadic way of life increasingly difficult to sustain.

First, deforestation and mining activities have led to a sharp decline in the reindeer herds that the Evenki rely on for survival. Reindeer hold a pivotal role for the Evenki people, serving as a crucial source of food security and acting as the foundation for preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage. Additionally, reindeer are intrinsically linked to the Evenki beliefs, social structure, administration of justice, and their profound understanding of the natural world across the territories they inhabit (Mustonen et al., 2021). Due to habitat loss, reindeer have been unable to obtain sufficient food and water sources, causing a significant decrease in the reindeer population.

Second, to protect rare flora and fauna, the government has gradually established nature reserves within the Evenki's activity range, such as the Ao Lu Gu Ya District. This move has allowed the Evenki to create a new source of income through tourism. The culture of northern indigenous communities primarily serves as a reflection of their rich spiritual realm, an aspect that has piqued the curiosity and drawn the attention of representatives from other civilizations over a long time (Zamaraeva et al., 2019). However, while these reserves protect the Evenki's reindeer, they have also completely severed the hunting and herding routes that the Evenki have relied on for centuries to sustain their livelihoods, depriving them of their main sources of subsistence.

Third, to completely curb their hunting activities within the reserves, the government has implemented large-scale firearm confiscation from the Evenki. For generations, the Evenki have relied on hunting for survival, with firearms being an indispensable survival tool. With their firearms confiscated, they have not only lost the ability to obtain food through traditional means, but also the ability to fend off attacks on their reindeer from wild animals.

This series of policies has led to an unprecedented destruction of the Evenki's traditional way of life and culture. Unable to sustain their nomadic lifestyle, the Evenki population has plummeted, with their language and culture gradually becoming endangered. Although the government has relaxed

some restrictions in recent years, the Evenki's plight remains extremely difficult, and they continue to struggle to protect their cultural identity.

## 4 CASE COMPARISON

Through these two cases, we can see that although both the Tuvan and Evenki face ecological migration pressures from protected area development, due to differences in their lifestyles and cultural traditions, the specific challenges they face and their coping strategies also differ significantly, as shown in table 1. As a settled ethnic group, although the Tuvan had to leave their ancestral regions, compared to the Evenki, the changes to their way of life and cultural traditions were relatively minor. Driven by tourism development, they were able to adapt to their new living environments and gain economic benefits, while also actively striving to protect their cultural heritage. Contrarily, the Evenki is a nomadic ethnic group, relying on traditional subsistence methods and cultural identity depend more heavily on the ecological environment. Facing the dual pressures of habitat loss and forced settlement, their traditional way of life has been severely disrupted, with their culture on the verge of being lost.

Furthermore, the two cases also reflect the different approaches and emphases of the government in dealing with ecological migration and cultural preservation issues. In the case of the Tuvan, the local government focused on developing the tourism industry to drive economic revitalization, packaging and utilizing Tuvan culture as an important tourism resource. Although this approach accelerated the commercialization of Tuvan culture to some extent, it also facilitated the dissemination and maintenance of cultural identity.

In the case of the Evenki, the government's initial intent was to protect the ecological environment and wildlife, adopting tough measures such as hunting bans and establishing nature reserves. However, in the implementation process, it overlooked the protection of the Evenki's traditional way of life. Purely promoting tourism as a replacement for pastoralism does not inherently safeguard rangelands. In fact, such an approach can introduce various environmental impacts and disrupt the traditional land use practices to which the rangelands have adapted over time (Fan et al., 2015). Only in recent years, under domestic and international pressure, has the government begun to loosen restrictions and provide support. Despite attempted actions like establishing. While initiatives like "nomadic kindergartens" that aim to teach through traditional practices such as reindeer herding serve as language

immersion programs, the authors acknowledge that significant damage has already occurred, necessitating tremendous efforts to revitalize and preserve these cultural practices (Seredkina and Strucheva, 2018).

The two cases also reflect the inherent tensions between ecological migration, biodiversity conservation, and cultural heritage preservation. As policymakers, how to strike a balance and coordinate among these three is a pressing challenge that needs to be addressed.

Table 1: Comparison of the Tuvan and Evenki.

Aspect	Tuvan	Evenki
Traditional Lifestyle	Settled ethnic group mainly engaged in farming and animal husbandry	Nomadic ethnic group mainly engaged in hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding
Religion	Own religion closely attached to nature; Shaman plays a fundamental role	Own religion closely attached to nature; Shaman plays a fundamental role
Cultural Identity	Deep emotional attachment to local land and natural resources	Cultural traditions deeply intertwined with the natural environment
Government Recognition	Not officially recognized as ethnicity within China	Officially recognized as ethnicity within China
Tourism Development	Tourism industry brought economic opportunities and improved living conditions	Creation of nature reserves led to a new income source through tourism
Challenges	Relocation from ancestral villages, disruption of farming and herding practices	Deforestation and mining caused decline in reindeer herds, loss of hunting routes, firearm confiscation
Cultural Impacts	Commodification and objectification of culture, weakening of vitality	Destruction of traditional way of life, endangerment of language and culture

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR CULTURAL INHERITANCE

While the implementation of ecological migration (eco-migration) policies may contribute to the improvement of the fragile environmental conditions in the areas of emigration, such policies simultaneously exert immense strain on the human-environment systems within the regions where these displaced populations resettle (Hu, Zhou and Yuan, 2018). Several important lessons can be learned from the case studies of the Tuvan and Evenki tribes that have implications for cultural inheritance among future indigenous groups facing ecological migration pressures. It is critical for governments and policymakers to consider the unique circumstances of each tribe early on. Nomadic cultures will require far different solutions compared to more settled groups, as fully disrupting traditional land use and access poses an existential threat to nomadic identities.

Co-developed plans are more likely to succeed than mere top-down policies that separate indigenous connections their original lands. Meaningful engagement with tribes from the project planning phase onward is essential to properly understand the cultural significance of places. However, any economic opportunities also need to be accompanied by active support for protecting languages, skills, crafts, and other cultural heritage at risk of loss if

displaced traditional practices are not replaced. A balanced approach is needed that reconciles environmental goals with cultural sustainability to ensure neither takes total priority without consent. Policies also need to be responsive to tribal feedback over time to adjust for unintended impacts. At last, supporting intergenerational cultural learning will be particularly important where migration disrupts traditional knowledge transmission. Overall, a balance between environmental, economic, and cultural needs should be the utmost important when it comes to the making of such policies.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this analysis of the Tuvan and Evenki ethnic groups highlights the complex challenges that ecological migration poses for indigenous cultural preservation. As climate change, resource exploitation, and conservation efforts continue disrupting traditional lands and practices, more communities will undoubtedly face similar displacements in the future. The cases demonstrate that while economic opportunities may arise from new land uses, cultural identities rooted in place and distinctive livelihoods are not easily replaced. Nomadic cultures, in particular, remain threatened by loss of access to grazing territories and migration



routes. However, with meaningful participation of affected tribes and nuanced policy approaches, it is possible to balance ecological, economic and cultural priorities. Co-managed protected areas, alternative livelihood programs, and proactive cultural transmission efforts can protect the indigenous communities. Overall, this research emphasizes that to truly support indigenous communities in the context of environmental changes, governments must look beyond short-term outcomes to the long-term viability of unique worldviews sustained through multi-generational relationships with traditional homelands. With flexibility, free consent standards, and holistic solutions based on collaboration with indigenous communities themselves, it may be possible to facilitate ecological migration while still preserving cultural diversity.

## REFERENCES

- Li Y, López-Carr D and Chen W, 2014, Factors Affecting migration intentions in ecological restoration areas and their implications for the sustainability of ecological migration policy in arid northwest China, *Sustainability*, 6, 8639-8660.
- Amalbekova MB and Shagimgerieva BE, 2023, Essays on Modern, *Tuvan Culture Turkic Stud Journal*, 1, 162-169.
- Mawkanuli T, 2001, The Jungar Tuvas: Language and National Identity in the PRC, *Central Asian Survey*, 20, 497-517.
- Yang J, Ryan C and Zhang L, 2014, The 'Culture Broker' as Performer: Tuva and Kazakhs 'Home Visits' in Kanas, China, *Asia Pac J Tour Res.*, 19, 493-516.
- Kuzhuget AK, 2018, Tuvan Traditional Culture as a Socio-Historical Phenomenon *Polylinguality and Transcultural Practices*, 15, 632-637.
- Zamaraeva YS, Luzan VS, Metlyaeva SV, Seredkina NN, Koptseva NP, Fil'ko AI and Khrebtov Mya, 2019, Religion of the Evenki: History and modern times, *J Siberian Fed Univ Hum Soc Sci*, 12, 853-871.
- Mustonen T, Andreeva T and Shadrin V, 2021, Return of Nimat? —Wild Reindeer as an Indicator of Evenki Biocultural Systems, *Sustainability*, 13, 12107.
- Fan M, Li W, Wei G and Luo F, 2015, Tourism impacts on indigenous pastoral communities in China, *Rangeland Ecol Manage*, 68, 86-91.
- Seredkina NN and Strucheva ES, 2018, Revival of the Evenki Language: Traditional and Modern Formats, *J Siberian Fed Univ Hum Soc Sci*, 11, 615-628.
- Hu Y, Zhou W and Yuan T, 2018, Environmental impact assessment of ecological migration in China: a survey of immigrant resettlement regions, *J Zhejiang Univ-SC A*, 19, 3 240-254.