



# Decentralization, Ecological Construction, and the Environment in Post-Reform China: Case Study from Uxin Banner, Inner Mongolia

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**Summary.** — This paper explores why post-reform decentralization in China has failed to bring about environmental sustainability, using a case study from Uxin banner in Inner Mongolia. The local government has promoted intensive grassland improvement in its political, economic, and environmental policies under the umbrella of “ecological construction,” a term used to describe the enhancement of vegetation cover on this arid terrain. The government’s aggressive approach to ecological construction, however, is incongruent with the ecology of the Inner Mongolian drylands. Consequently, although beneficial to short-term economic growth, “ecological construction” has led to unintended grassland degradation, thus undermining environmental sustainability.

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*Key words* — decentralization, local government, ecological construction, grassland improvement, inner Mongolia—China

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When China’s economic reforms were launched in 1978, they marked an important transition in Chinese politics and economy. Since then, rural communes have been dismantled and land distributed to households, and the influence of the market economy has penetrated all corners of China (Oi, 1995; Unger, 2002). The natural environment, perceived as an essential resource to fuel economic growth, has attracted increasing attention from the state, and a variety of governmental policies and programs have attempted to address environmental issues (Feng, 2000; Guo & Wang, 1998). The term “ecological construction (*sheng tai jian she*)” has a particular importance in these initiatives, and it refers to state-directed efforts to improve the Chinese rural environment (Guo, 2002; Nie & Lu, 2001).

Concurrent with a whole series of environmental improvements, state power in China has become increasingly decentralized (Jia & Lin, 1994; Lin, 1999; Oi, 1995; Unger & Chan, 1999). While the Chinese state continues to

exercise top-down political control, central policies have become general “directives,” which are articulated with increasing detail as they travel down China’s hierarchical bureaucratic structure to regional and local governments. Increasingly, environmental strategies and the execution of specific policies occur at the local level. Even the most important rural reform policy, the provision of land contracts and tenure to households, has been practiced in widely differing ways since local governments have adopted different criteria for land allocation

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and different contract lengths (see Banks, 2001; Ho, 2000; Kung & Liu, 1997). As a result, Benewick (1998, p. 459) observes a political "power drift" occurring "from the party to state institutions and from the center to the regions and localities," and in considering the economic impacts, Oi (1995) argues that local governments have become important market players and have therefore played a more significant role in fostering economic development.

The Chinese local government also has a larger stake in environmental policy-making and implementation than it has previously enjoyed (Wushen Qi, 2001a; XZBSWYH, 2000). Existing studies, however, are skeptical of the local government's role, arguing that the record of environmental protection is questionable. Farmland policies offer an example. According to Skinner, Kuhn, and Joseph (2001), the local government in Zhejiang Province has given priority to economic development and facilitated the conversion of farmland to industrial use, while the central government at the same time has emphasized the protection of the country's agricultural land as an important directive. Elsewhere in China, similar economic interests often are achieved with significant environmental costs (Smil, 1993). While in China as a whole, both environmental improvement and destruction have occurred during the post-reform era (Jiang, 2004; Muldavin, 2000; Yin & Xu, 2002), most researchers maintain that reform policies have accelerated, rather than retarded, rural land degradation (Muldavin, 1997; Sanders, 1999; Williams, 1996).

As decentralization becomes a widespread global trend, especially in post-socialist countries (Turner, 1999), understanding its environmental implications is pivotal if we are to achieve environmental sustainability. Given the largely negative environmental outcomes of decentralization in China, the following question emerges: Why has decentralization not been reliable in fostering environmental sustainability, even as it promotes socio-economic development? Locally based analyses are essential for gaining an understanding of this question. In the existing scholarship on China, great attention has been devoted to the central-local relationship and economic outcomes of decentralization (Chung, 1995; Fan, 1995; Huang, 1996; Jia & Lin, 1994; Lin, 1999; Oi, 1995). In comparison, much less attention has been paid to the ways in which

the local government manages and affects the environment (but see Skinner et al., 2001).

This paper examines the local government's efforts in "ecological construction" in Uxin banner, a pastoral area in Inner Mongolia. To explore decentralization's environmental effects, I examine the way in which the local government has treated the environment. In particular, I analyze *how* the local government has aggressively promoted "ecological construction" through policy articulation and implementation. Following the notion that environmental problems originate in part from the ways in which the environment is understood or "constructed" by society (Cronon, 1996; Shapiro, 2001), I explore how the local government interprets "ecological construction" and how this interpretation becomes codified in policy implementations and is "written" on the landscape. Ironically, in Uxin banner, it is precisely the local government's aggressive efforts to improve grassland and pasture that have led to the failure to achieve environmental sustainability, since these efforts disregard the ecology of this dry sandy region.

The term "ecological construction" carries double meanings. First, as has been intended in the government propaganda in Uxin banner, the term refers to "ecological improvement" as a material process, which is associated with such practices as fencing grassland, planting trees, shrubs, and grass, and irrigating cropland. Second, "ecological construction" refers to the ways in which the local government has conducted grassland improvement and "constructed" locally specific practices. Equating "ecological construction" with intensive land-use practices has been central to local policies and their implementation.

Uxin banner is situated in Ih-Ju League (re-named Ordos City in 2001) of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Figure 1). It comprises 13 townships/*sums*.<sup>1</sup> Except for its southern river valley, Uxin is primarily a sheep-grazing pastoral area. Other livestock includes goats, cows, horses, and pigs. Of its population of 98,000, 31% are Mongols. Sitting at the center of the Mu Us Sandy Land, Uxin is dry, windy, and sandy, and its annual precipitation averages only 330–360 mm. With a total land area of 11,645 km<sup>2</sup>, only about 55% is covered by vegetation—sandy shrub and lowland grass, as well as cropland and planted trees—while the remainder is occupied by moving sand dunes. Ecological improvements have targeted the sandy land, both the sandy vegetation that

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