

## **LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MINORITIES IN CHINA**

**Guoqing Ma**

Institute of Sociology and Anthropology, Peking University, P.R. China.

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### **1. Introduction**

China is a multi-ethnic developing country with a low level of natural resources per capita, and a rapid rate of resource depletion. Mineral resources are being over exploited and wastefully excavated. Often the rich deposits are taken and the poor deposits discarded. There are also many other problems concerning freshwater retraction, forest cutting, field irrigation, livestock grazing, and cultivation, etc. Population pressure is also an inescapable problem. According to the latest figures published by the Statistical Bureau of China in February 1999, the total population of China had reached 1,248 million in 1998. China is becoming one of the most seriously desertified countries in the world, mainly because of the population pressure and over-exploitation.

In a complex pluralistic society, different groups created their own social concept and carry environmental relics, such as societal behavior, attitude and action style, all of which are related to the natural environment. At the same time, we can find a few cultural impacts and contradictions regarding ecological issues. These relics are mainly present in the knowledge of environmental issues among local people, and still have important significance to us for today's ecological environmental protection and maintaining a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Knowledge of environmental issues mainly includes utilization of the natural environment, control of the human environment and coordination between humans and nature.

In this system, the influence of social organization and cultural tradition upon the environment is obvious.

Scholars often ignore cultural factors when they describe environmental changes. Our focus should not be recognizing how cultural differences effect the environment, but how to link environmental changes with consideration of the effect of cultural factors.

China is a country with a 'multi-ecological' environment, multi-ethnicity and multi-pluralism. Besides the 56 ethnic races (including Han), there are still a few

unrecognized ethnic groups in the country. According to the 4th General Census of China in 1990, the total population of the minorities is more than 90 million, which is about 8% of the total population of China. Because of historical migration, integration and disintegration of ethnic groups, it becomes a kind of pluralistic erggeric structure, saying: “Mine are in yours, yours are in mine.” In fact, the relationships among some groups are related to the environmental concept and damage to the environment. The direct result of deterioration of the ecological environment is that it brings a negative influence to economic development of the region, and the development itself falls into a vicious circle. So the coexistence and the intertwining growth of the pluralistic culture has become a major characteristic of China’s society. Against this background, while studying sustainable development issues, it is appropriate to show respect to ethnic cultures, and to consider the relationship among the minorities about the specific characters of their culture and the ecological environment. The diversity of the ecological environment is closely linked with the diversification of the ethnic culture. Any traditional ethnic culture is created in the course of adaptation and reshaping the natural ecological environment in which they live. So, there are distinctive ethnic features associated with cultural traditions, utilization of natural resources, and different living styles.

In China, the regions suffering the worst ecological deterioration are mainly those occupied by ethnic minorities. These can be divided on the basis of land use and ecology into: a) ethnic region with grassland ecosystem, b) ethnic region with forest ecosystem, and c) ethnic region with mountain farming ecosystem

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Ma Guoqing** (male) is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Sociology and Anthropology, Peking University.