

# **Opposition to the 'Ecological Relocation' Project from the Evenki People**

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## **Abstract**

**At the end of 2003, the Chinese government finalized the "Ecological Relocation" project for the Ewenki ethnic minority in Northeast China, planning to relocate them to cities, raise reindeer in captivity, and implement new education. This move was strongly opposed by the Ewenki people, who refused to move away from their ancestral habitat. Starting from the spirit and philosophical culture of the Ewenki people, this article analyzes the core reasons for their opposition to immigration. The Ewenki people uphold the natural worship cosmology of animism, and their social development is deeply integrated with nature. They firmly oppose the destruction and excessive development of nature. However, the logging industry of the Han people in Ewenki settlements has already caused their dissatisfaction, and being forced to move away from the mountains and forests is seen as a violation of natural laws. In addition, the "ecological migration" project not only deprived the Ewenki people of their natural habitat but also challenged their spiritual culture centered on shamanism through the promotion of atheistic education. The forced shift in worldview brought about by policies and the isolation from nature continue to weaken and even lead to the extinction of the Ewenki culture. This article ultimately points out that the project is a disrespect and erosion of the Ewenki culture, and calls for diverse measures to be taken to save this precious minority culture.**

## **Keywords**

**Ecological Relocation; Ewenki People; Shamanistic Cultures.**

## **1. Introduction**

By the end of 2003, the government of the People's Republic of China, led by the Han ethnicity as the majority, finalized the 'Ecological Relocation' project for Evenki, a minority ethnic group in northeastern China (Fraser, 2010). The project involves relocating people to towns near urban areas away from their natural habitat, captive breeding of reindeer in pens, and education about socialist values. Unsurprisingly, the project met strong opposition from the Evenki people. They refused to relocate and remained in their forests. The project was globally criticized from a humanistic perspective.

At the beginning of policy design, the ecological migration project was seen as a dual measure that balances ecological protection and ethnic development. The government hopes to help the Ewenki people integrate into modern society through centralized settlement, so that the achievements of social development can be spread to all ethnic groups, while fundamentally reducing the ecological damage caused by human activities in the Greater Khingan Range. However, policymakers have overlooked the inseparable symbiotic relationship between the Ewenki culture and nature. The spiritual beliefs, production methods, and social structures formed by this ethnic group for thousands of years are all based on nature as the core carrier. This deep cultural dependence has led to a distinct dual impact of the ecological migration project on the lives of the Ewenki people. On the one hand, this policy has brought about a

modern leap forward in material life and basic security to a certain extent, but on the other hand, it has caused a severe impact on the cultural core and traditional production methods that have been passed down from generation to generation. To discover the reason behind the Evenki people's strong opposition to the relocation project, we should first look at the spiritual and philosophical culture of the Evenki.

## **2. Cultural Cornerstone based on Nature Worship**

Evenki have adopted an animistic lifestyle throughout their history. Thus, nature plays the most essential role in their spiritual culture. Evenki people believe the world humans live in is comprised of the upper sky, land, and humans. The sky, land, and broad nature have appeared long before humans. Therefore, the nature and the cosmos are the prerequisite conditions of manhood. With this belief, the Evenki people worship nature and every life adopted by nature, including trees, rivers, stones, and fire. This worship cognition makes them acknowledge their own limitations and advocate following natural laws rather than being above nature.

Evenki people are instinctively aware of the limitations of human power in front of nature. From 'how reindeer develop seven-fork horns' to 'why thunderstorms occurs', Evenki people admit that the physical world perceived by humans is the product of inaccurate perception (Chao, 2017). In their cognition, the wisdom of nature is far beyond the reach of humans. Faced with unpredictable weather and unpredictable natural disasters, the Evenki people do not try to resist but choose to comply and maintain humility towards nature. This clear understanding of human limitations has led the Evenki people to form a unique view of nature. Human beings must rely on the wisdom of nature to survive, follow all the laws formulated by nature, and accept the arrangements of natural forces for human development. The thousands of years of mountain and forest life have made the Evenki people deeply understand that only by living in harmony with nature can their ethnic group achieve long-term reproduction. Once they violate the laws of nature, they will inevitably be punished by nature.

## **3. The Integration of Social Development and Nature**

Besides the philosophical cosmos view of Evenki based on nature, Evenki people see social formation as a development closely related to nature as well. Evenki ancestors are the creators of the Evenki social structure. The ancestors strictly followed the natural rules, balancing their own power with natural power. They used collective wisdom to create the original social structure while connecting with nature. In general, social development equals the development of an understanding of nature. In the cognitive system of the Evenki people, the development of society is equivalent to the deepening of their understanding of nature. Therefore, they firmly oppose actions that destroy nature and regard them as a blatant violation of natural laws.

Within the basic rules of Evenki culture above, the Evenki people are strongly against the disharmonious coexistence between nature and humanity. Any violation would lead to various punishments or even disasters. Firstly, the Evenki people oppose destroying nature, as is obvious in their worldview. Second, they oppose enhanced cultivation beyond the traditional practices, since it causes harm to nature. Third, they oppose overly exploiting natural resources for human greed. I believe these are the essential reasons behind their opposition to relocation. Before the relocation policy, Han people, the majority of Chinese ethnicity, had long developed a lumbering industry in northeast China, specifically the Xiaoxing'an Mountains, where Evenki people live. Although the government established preservation programs later, the lumbering has profoundly upset the Evenki people. This can correspond to the third opposition of the Evenki people. In their view, everything provided by

nature is limited, but the greed and desire of humans are unlimited. If humans don't control their greed and keep exploiting natural resources, like trees, they will eventually be punished by nature.

In addition, moving away from the mountains and forests and into cities is seen by the Evenki as a blatant violation of natural laws. The survival wisdom of the Ewenki people for thousands of years has been formed through interaction with the mountains and forests. They are familiar with every inch of the land in the mountains and forests, which are their roots and carriers of their spiritual beliefs. Detaching from nature and no longer relying on it for survival means that the Ewenki people have lost the foundation of their existence, the soul of their culture, and the complete decline of Ewenki civilization. Therefore, no matter what modernization guarantees the government provides, a large number of Ewenki people have always firmly opposed this immigration project and remained steadfast in the mountains and forests where they have lived for generations.

#### **4. Evenki People's Worship of Nature**

Under the broad natural view of the Evenki people, there are some detailed customs or traditions they value. These customs and traditions are concrete manifestations of the concept of nature worship in daily production and life, covering various aspects such as reindeer breeding, hunting, and sacrifice, forming the unique cultural system of the Ewenki people and making nature worship a cultural gene integrated into their bloodline.

As a semi-nomadic herding group, the Evenki people are recognized as 'reindeer herders'. (Kong, 2023) On one hand, reindeer is one of the many animistic beings they worship. On the other hand, Evenki developed an industry and economic society dependent on reindeer, as well as spiritual activities based on reindeer. Thus, reindeer play an important role in Evenki culture.

The 'Shewoki' is the core god for reindeer protection. It helps people find lost reindeer and relieves the pain of people losing them. When a deformed newborn reindeer dies, it is a bad signal, and Evenki would set up a ceremony, including Shaman dances, to ask for protection from the 'Shewoki' God. The 'Alon' God is for healing reindeer diseases. Another god for reindeer protection is the Bear God. For the Evenki people, wolves are afraid of bears. So when reindeer are equipped with the scent of Bear God, the wolves would stay away from them. The degree to which Evenki people adopt spiritual ways of reindeer protection reflects how they attach great importance to this special animal species.

As mentioned in the third god above, Evenki uses bears to protect reindeer. In fact, bears do not only play this role. Evenki people revere bears for their huge bodies and cruel wildness, regarding them as the king of forests. Moreover, bears behave like humans in certain circumstances. They can walk upright like humans and grab fruits with their front paws. Evenki people even suspect that bears can understand human languages. Therefore, there are various myths about the mysterious and fearful figures of bears.

There are two interesting reflections on bear myths. Firstly, the Evenki people imagine bears share the same genetic relations with humans. They evolved from humans. This is a 'whimsy' of the Evenki people. It can be considered transcending self-awareness, also a reflection of the Evenki worldview--everything has the same origin. Secondly, hunting and consuming bears while worshipping bears is a seeming contradiction, which is a common phenomenon in hunter-gatherer societies. The Evenki may regard it as normal; they created many traditional measures to remedy their sin of eating bears. They believe that bears' souls would not die after being killed, and humans should take measures to send their souls back to the nature gods. If people kill bears as a case of last resort, they would host a ceremony as soon as possible, preventing the souls from harming humanity.

Evenki are hunter-gatherers, but they worship animals. Meanwhile, in their myths and folklore, the majority of stories about the interaction between hunters and prey are about harmony (Chao, 2017). These stories depict the kindness of hunters, the emotions of prey, and the peaceful symbiotic relationship between the two. These stories are not simply literary creations, but vivid manifestations of the Evenki people's worldview of "harmonious coexistence between man and nature". From the perspective of modern society, this can be understood as a spiritual redemption achieved through literature and art, allowing hunters to maintain reverence for nature while obtaining survival resources. For the Evenki people, this is their most authentic and normal way of interacting with nature, regardless of contradictions or not, but rather their survival wisdom formed over thousands of years.

The Evenki people adopt the most traditional and original animistic lifestyle. Their worship of natural gods empowers them with great emotions and wisdom. Among all the gods, the god of heaven and the god of the sun are the most sacred. The sun dominates everything in the world, bringing brightness and warmth to the world. The god of the sun is a huge head of an elderly person formed by fireballs, smiling at the world, according to the Evenki. It is strictly stipulated that people, including young kids, cannot point to the sun with their fingers. Gods of moon, stars, and rainbows are also important objects of veneration (Chao, 2017). Evenki people personify these elements in the cosmos. The intense worship of elements reflects the Evenki cosmology worldview.

Wind, thunder, and rain are natural phenomena that create complicated understandings for the Evenki people. They are considered changes in nature. The God of wind is personified as a kind elderly woman. She is clean and friendly most times; whenever she meets immoral behaviors, her hair releases power to sweep away evil, and that is the wind. The God of thunder is personified as a powerful elder man, coming from the fear of thunder. Evenki believes that only when people offend the thunder god would they hurt by lightning. For them, thunder kills the guilty, allowing a return to peace. The seemingly contradictory mental explanations of thunder reveal the worldview of the Evenki people that contains various contradictions.

Mountains, forests, and rivers are basic natural beings we regard as objective. However, they are endowed with spiritual meaning by the Evenki people. There's an old folklore description of the mountain god, named 'Bainaqa':

In ancient times, an Evenki tribe leader led a hunt on a large mountain. As they wrapped up, he asked his hunters to estimate the number and types of animals caught. While they guessed, a mysterious elderly man appeared, accurately revealing the exact numbers and species of the trapped animals. Before they could invite him to sit, he vanished. When they checked their catches the next day, they found his information perfectly matched. This story spread widely, and people came to understand that the old man was 'Bainaqa', the guardian spirit of the mountains.

Evenki people live in the mountains, rely on every resource in them, and are embedded in them. They worship mountains as gods. Each tribe chooses a specific head mountain, placing colorful decorations on the mountain. Evenki people also worship trees. Cutting the trees would offend the tree gods and would be severely punished. This also explains why the Evenki people are so against lumbering by the Han.

Regarding all the interactions between the Evenki and nature mentioned above, it is obvious why the Evenki hate living outside the mountains. Living in completely human-built places takes the Evenki away from their natural surroundings. It violates the natural rules. One of the Evenki complained that they could not see the stars in the enclosed Han houses anymore--they were used to seeing the broad sky through the specially designed holes in 'Xileng' columns, their traditional housing(Huang and Na, 2014).

## 5. Shamanism of Evenki

The 'ecological relocation' project is not only the deprivation of their natural habitat. Combined with a series of policies conducted by the Han government toward the Evenki, the project is an ultimate impairment of Evenki culture. The immigration project not only requires the Ewenki people (including children) to move out of the mountains and settle in cities and receive standardized socialist values education, but more importantly, it also systematically instills atheistic ideas in them, attempting to fundamentally change the Ewenki people's worldview and values, which is completely contrary to their spiritual and religious traditions and touches the core bottom line of Ewenki culture. Shamanism, as the most representative religious belief form of the Ewenki people, is the core of their spiritual world and has also become a key target of the ecological migration project.

Similar to the various Shamanistic cultures around the globe, the Evenki Shaman is the messenger between the spiritual world and the material world. Normal people are not able to transfer their souls between and through worlds. Therefore, they need ecstatic Shamans to help bring their souls upward or downward, in order to solve their physical or mental struggles (Eliade, 1951). Shamans are initiated through sudden eccentric behaviors performed by a certain person in the tribe, after the death of an old Shaman. Evenki people believed that divinities befall the person, and he or she should be taught to become a new Shaman. Evenki Shaman has multiple abilities, different from those of some Shamanistic cultures. They are not only able to kill evil, but they can also solve trivial conflicts or problems in the tribe, like naughty children or mental disorders. The major method of Shaman practices is dancing. Evenki Shaman dances are powerful, transcendent, and dramatic. They wear specially designed Shamanistic clothes with reindeer elements, as well as other natural beings. During the dance, shamans gradually enter a trance state, achieving the separation of soul and body, communicating with natural gods, conveying people's prayers, and bringing back the will of the gods. It can be said that shamanic dance is not only a religious ritual, but also a vivid embodiment of the Ewenki people's natural worship philosophy, and an important component of Ewenki culture.

Shamanism reveals a core theory that's integrated into natural animism. This special religious practice, together with other natural worships, comprised of Evenki spiritual world. Thus, the so-called 'ecological relocation' is a disrespectful policy. It forced the shift from an animistic to an atheist worldview. Neither is objectively correct, but the animistic worldview is the core of Evenki culture. The forced relocation away from nature and shift of worldview together weakened the Evenki culture, gradually leading it to its demise. There should be various remedies to save the culture.

## 6. Summary

At the end of 2003, the Chinese government finalized the "Ecological Migration" project for the Ewenki ethnic minority in Northeast China, planning to relocate them to cities, raise reindeer in captivity, and implement new education. This move was strongly opposed by the Ewenki people, who refused to move away from their ancestral habitat. Starting from the spirit and philosophical culture of the Ewenki people, this article analyzes the core reasons for their opposition to immigration. The Ewenki people uphold the natural worship cosmology of animism, and their social development is deeply integrated with nature. They firmly oppose the destruction and excessive development of nature. However, the logging industry of the Han people in Ewenki settlements has already caused their dissatisfaction, and being forced to move away from the mountains and forests is seen as a violation of natural laws. In addition, the "ecological migration" project not only deprived the Ewenki people of their natural habitat but also challenged their spiritual culture centered on shamanism through the promotion of

atheistic education. The forced shift in worldview brought about by policies and the isolation from nature continue to weaken and even lead to the extinction of the Ewenki culture.

Minority cultures are an important part of the treasure trove of Chinese culture. Protecting the Ewenki culture is not only a respect for a nation, but also a protection of the diversity of Chinese culture. To protect the Ewenki culture and prevent this precious minority culture from disappearing, it is necessary for the government, society, academia, and other parties to participate and take diverse remedial measures. On the one hand, the government needs to respect the Ewenki people's choice of lifestyle, support them to continue traditional reindeer farming and hunting in the mountains and forests, and protect the soil for their cultural survival; On the other hand, we need to strengthen the cultural inheritance of the Ewenki ethnic group, establish national cultural transmission centers, cultivate the younger generation of cultural inheritors, and protect the Ewenki language, script, customs, and religious beliefs; At the same time, we need to promote the integration of Ewenki culture with modern society. While protecting traditional culture, we should explore new development models such as cultural tourism integration and ecological breeding, so that the Ewenki people can enjoy the fruits of modern development while inheriting culture.

The lesson of ecological migration tells us that in the process of promoting the development and ecological protection of ethnic minorities, we must respect the uniqueness of ethnic culture, follow the logic of ethnic survival, and achieve the organic unity of ecological protection, economic development, and cultural inheritance, in order to truly achieve the common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups.

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