

From Local Knowledge to Global Wisdom: The Ecological Dimension of Nomadic Ethics and Its Value in Civilizational Dialogue

Sheleng Bai*

School of Journalism and Communication, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot 010022, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: In the context of the Anthropocene, where the global ecological crisis is intensifying, the pursuit of a civilizational paradigm shift beyond technological governance has become an imperative of our time. The ethical system of nomadic civilizations, centered on “reverence for life and respect for nature”, has often been regarded as a form of “local knowledge.” This paper argues that its inherent worldview of “animism”, the practical rationality of “taking only in season and respecting protected lands”, and the belief system of “Father Heaven, Mother Earth” collectively constitute a profound ecological philosophy. This philosophy is capable of transcending its local origins to become a “global wisdom” that contributes to the worldwide dialogue on ecological ethics. A philosophical interpretation of the ecological dimension of nomadic ethics not only reveals its timeless significance for ecological civilization but also provides vital Eastern wisdom and a reflective mirror for addressing the predicaments of modernity and fostering a shared future for humans and nature.

Keywords: Nomadic ethics; Ecological dimension; Local knowledge; Global wisdom; Civilizational dialogue

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1. Introduction

The symbiotic relationship between humans and nature forms the foundation of civilizational sustainability. As a distinctive component within the pluralistic yet integrated framework of Chinese civilization, nomadic civilization is not a historical relic. Through millennia of dynamic adaptation to the grassland ecosystem, it has developed a body of sustainable wisdom that is both scientific and practical. The ecological dimension embedded in its ethical and moral traditions is not merely “local knowledge” adapted to a specific environment, but also a philosophical resource endowed with universal value. In an era of global ecological crisis, rediscovering and interpreting this wisdom—enabling it to move from the grasslands to the global stage and participate in the constructive dialogue on ecological civilization—is of unprecedented urgency and importance.

2. The ethics of “reverence for life”: Ecological philosophy in institutions and customs

The nomadic ethic of “reverence for life” is not a simplistic perceptual concept, but a form of philosophical consciousness embodied in institutional norms and daily customs. This concept was institutionalized early in the formation of the Mongol Empire through legal codes such as the Great Yassa. Decrees issued by Genghis Khan—for example, “defiling springs is forbidden”, “drawing water with bare hands is forbidden”, “urinating on ashes is forbidden”, as well as provisions protecting flora and fauna, such as “prohibiting the hunting of young animals in specific seasons”—established the earliest ecological legal framework in nomadic society. The essence of these laws lies not merely in resource management based on economic calculation, but in a respect for the intrinsic value of natural life, elevating ecological protection from individual morality to a collective responsibility and laying the institutional foundation for nomadic ecological ethics.

At the level of custom, nomadic peoples practiced unique burial traditions that embodied the philosophy of “returning life to nature.” Whether the deep burial of emperors with “no mound above the tomb”, or the “sky burial” practiced by commoners, the core principle was to minimize disturbance to the grassland ecosystem. As recorded in *Caomu Zi*, “They were sent to the northern burial grounds, buried deep, then trampled flat by ten thousand horses. They waited until the grass turned green before withdrawing the guard, by which time the land had become level with the plains, leaving no trace behind”^[1]. This concept of “from nature, back to nature” vividly illustrates the deep ecological idea that “humans and nature form a community of shared destiny.” The practice of sky burial carried this concept to its extreme: no coffins or trees were used as barriers, and no earth was disturbed or polluted by cremation; instead, the body was ultimately returned to heaven and earth, completing the final cycle of life matter. This was not merely custom, but a profound form of cosmological education.

Moreover, totem worship and behavioral taboos permeated daily life, forming a “capillary” network of nomadic ecological ethics. Taboos such as prohibiting harm to insects and birds, forbidding ground-breaking during the grassland’s growth period, and avoiding uprooting medicinal plants when gathering—interwoven with linguistic taboos such as “if one handles bird eggs with bare hands, the bird will not incubate them”—created an invisible web of ecological protection. This system was not mere “superstition”, but a cultural code refined through long-term trial and error, used to restrain short-term interests and maintain the long-term stability of the ecosystem. It represents the living expression of nomadic ecological philosophy in the micro-contexts of daily life.

3. The hunting ethic of “taking in season, respecting protected lands”: Practical rationality based on ecological thresholds

Hunting, as an important supplement to the nomadic economy, was strictly confined within an ethical framework of “moderation” and “sustainability”, forming a highly rationalized practical wisdom of “taking only in season and respecting protected lands.” This ethical norm shares common roots with the traditional Chinese governance wisdom of “prohibiting and permitting according to the season”, but its unique value lies in its understanding of the modern concept of “natural carrying capacity” within the fragile grassland ecosystem.

Its core lies in a profound insight into “temporality” and “population dynamics.” The *Hei Da Shi Lue* records: “The hunting season lasts from the ninth month to the second month. When they regularly eat what they hunt, they kill fewer sheep”^[2]. By strictly limiting hunting to the winter months and actively avoiding

the spring and summer breeding and growth seasons of animals, this practice demonstrated absolute respect for the natural rhythms of life—a form of rigid self-discipline from the temporal dimension to ensure species continuity.

Even more refined was the “release ethic.” Originating from the ancient taboo of “avoiding the destruction of entire herds”, it crystallized into three principles: releasing paired males and females to ensure the genetic basis for reproduction; releasing the weak, young, or injured, reflecting ecological ethical concern for vulnerable life; and strictly prohibiting the hunting of pregnant females, considered the greatest disgrace for a hunter. As recorded in d’Ohsson’s *History of the Mongols*, elders would plead with the Khan for the remaining prey, “who then released them, so that they might multiply and serve for future hunts” ^[3]. This act was not simple compassion, but a far-sighted form of “ecological investment.” By actively maintaining the balance of species numbers and structure, it enabled the sustainable use of natural resources, demonstrating a dialectical unity of “benefit” (immediate needs) and “righteousness” (ecological balance).

Viewed through the lens of consumption philosophy, nomadic hunting practices were strictly bound by “genuine needs”, thoroughly rejecting accumulation and exchange driven by greed. Their consumption ethos rested on two pillars: first, using the ecosystem’s carrying capacity as the absolute upper limit, never overdrawing nature’s regenerative ability; second, using the community’s healthy survival as the measure, rejecting excessive material demands. This practical rationality of “take only what is needed” was a survival wisdom honed by nomadic peoples in a fragile ecology. It resonates with the warning in *Lüshi Chunqiu*: “If you drain the pond to catch fish, you will certainly catch fish, but next year there will be no fish”—together offering an answer to the eternal question of how to coexist harmoniously with nature.

4. The belief system of “Father Heaven, Mother Earth, animism”: Internalization and sublimation of ecological constraints

The deepest and most stable foundation of nomadic ecological ethics lies in the belief system of “Father Heaven, Mother Earth” and “animism.” This system internalized ecological protection from external norms into spiritual belief and elevated it from rational calculation to emotional identification, thereby endowing it with cultural vitality that transcends time and space.

4.1. “Father Heaven, Mother Earth”: Ecological responsibility in cosmic kinship

Nomadic peoples regarded Heaven and Earth as the supreme parents, believing that “Heaven, Earth, and Humanity are the most fundamental elements of nature. Therefore, humans revere Heaven and Earth just as they respect their own parents, and Heaven and Earth also nurture and benefit humans as if protecting their own children” ^[4]. This “cosmic kinship theory” shaped a unique human-nature relationship: humans are not conquerors of nature, but children deeply favored by Heaven and Earth. Consequently, gratitude and reciprocation became a natural ethical obligation.

This belief was directly embodied in daily ecological practices: the offering of the first bowl of freshly brewed milk tea to Heaven and Earth, or the ritual of flicking liquor three times as libation before drinking—these ceremonies constituted integral components of a “gratitude economy.” Meanwhile, practices such as using dried dung as fuel, burying ashes, and protecting grass roots represented acts of devout stewardship towards the “body of the Parental Cosmos.” This kinship-based ethic of responsibility proves more enduring and profound

than contract-based relationships, transforming ecological conservation into an instinctive cultural practice deeply embedded within the collective consciousness, rather than merely an external imposition.

4.2. “Animism”: Ecological awe in Shamanic belief

The “animism” of Shamanism endowed the grassland ecosystem with sacredness. It held that mountains, rivers, forests, springs, and even birds and beasts were inhabited by “spirits” possessing will and power. This “re-enchantment of nature” turned the entire environment into a “sacred space” filled with meaning and taboos. Polluting springs, trampling seedlings, or hunting spiritual animals (e.g., eagles, wolves) were considered sacrilegious acts that would incur divine punishment.

Take Oboo worship as an example: it was not only a religious ritual but also an exquisite ecological protection mechanism. The area surrounding the Oboo became a de facto “community nature reserve”, where grazing and logging were strictly prohibited. Through the power of faith, core ecological protection zones were established and maintained. This “inside-out” model of constraint—shaping inner awe to regulate external behavior—offers a key insight for modern ecological governance: the most effective constraint is self-constraint deeply embedded within culture.

5. Conclusion: Ecological insights from grassland wisdom to global civilization

The ecological ethics of nomadic civilization is a highly mature system of wisdom integrating institutions, practices, and beliefs. It is by no means an “Other” opposed to modern civilization, but an indispensable civilizational resource for addressing the global ecological crisis.

Philosophically, with its cosmology of “animism” and “Father Heaven, Mother Earth”, it provides a potent response to modernity’s “disenchantment of nature”, offering ancient wisdom for “re-enchanting” the natural world and restoring the sanctity and interconnectedness of life. On the practical level, its hunting ethic of “taking in due season and respecting protected lands” vividly demonstrates the essence of “sustainable development”—a form of prosperous moderation grounded in awareness of ecological thresholds. In terms of governance, it reveals that sound ecological governance must “integrate strength with softness”: requiring not only rigid laws like the Yassa legal code, but more importantly, the soft power embodied in Oboo worship traditions, which can be internalized as civic virtue and cultural practice.

Therefore, the purpose of rediscovering the ecological dimension of nomadic ethics is not nostalgia, but a forward-looking endeavor. It represents a concrete path for the creative transformation and innovative development of China’s excellent traditional culture, aiming to elevate this ancient “local knowledge” beyond temporal and spatial boundaries into a “global wisdom” that can participate in the global dialogue on ecological ethics and contribute unique solutions for building a “community of life for humans and nature.” This is both the contribution of nomadic civilization to Chinese civilization and the contribution of Chinese civilization to world civilization.

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