Making emigration for the sake of environment?: A political ecology of ecological resettlement in China

INTRODUCTION
The Chinese central government has demonstrated an increasing will and capacity in tackling environmental problems in the last decade. A great number of resources have been allocated to eight big ecological construction programs mainly in the western region. Ecological resettlement, which is intended to restore environment in ecological vulnerable rural areas through moving people out to urban places, has been widely applied across the programs. In Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, ecological resettlement projects were carried out in a large scale as a response to pressing threats posted by intensified sandstorms impacting wider geographic areas between 1998 and 2001 because exploitative uses of rangeland such as overgrazing are identified as the main causes of land degradation and desertification and the consequential sandstorms.

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES
This research sets up a political ecology framework to explore who are making and shaping the outcomes of ecological resettlement. The framework contains four conceptual aspects: (1) it emphasizes distinctions of actors at different scales and the power relations; (2) it examines the issue in relation to a wider context; (3) it scrutinizes the constructive nature of discourses on environmental problems; and (4) it highlights the agency of the affected people in micro-politics. Empirical works are composed of governmental document analysis and long time field works in a pastoral township of Inner Mongolia. Participatory observation and in-depth interviews have been done with migrants, non-migrant and return migrants in the resettlement village, the city and the pastoral villages.

CONCLUSIONS
(1) The difference of agendas at central and local governments make it difficult to achieve the environmental goal through ecological resettlement projects.
(2) Migration patterns after resettlement have significant implications for the environment and for the future of rural China.

PROBLEM STATEMENT
Despite of the wide application, the policy horizon of ecological resettlement is unclear. Given the lack of specific independent policy on it at the national level, some studies trace its origin to poverty alleviation policy while some other relate it to Involuntary Resettlement framework. Nevertheless, ecological resettlement models in practices demonstrate strong characteristics of modernization models. The ambiguity thus causes conceptual and evaluation difficulties. I hypothesizes that the ambiguity is a good illustration of Chinese politics, being shaped by the different interests and interactions between central-local governments.

The other focus of the study is on migration and its effects upon rangeland use. So far few studies have done on ecological resettlement from a migration perspective. Study on migration decisions and behaviors are key to understand local processes and consequences of ecological resettlement and the roles of different factors.

KEY FINDINGS
(1) Ecological resettlement projects are financed by the central government under the umbrella of the Western Development Strategy, which targets on ecological construction and infrastructure construction. Provincial governments and below have major incentives in finance and mainly target on the number of resettled population.
(2) Implementation of ecological resettlement projects was a negotiation process between the local officials and the affected people. Migration decisions were mainly driven by social, economic and political factors. Environmental factor rarely had a direct impact on migration.
(3) Migration patterns directly affected the spatial patterns of rangeland use. However, migrants continued keeping herds at non-migrants’. New arrangements of livelihoods evolved between migrants and non-migrants based on their places, underlying the importance of social networks.