

Original Paper

The International Communication of China's "Two Mountains" Concept from Local Practice to Global Narrative

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Abstract

The idea that "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets", commonly referred to as the "Two Mountains" concept, has become one of the best-known expressions of China's ecological civilization agenda. First specified in Yucun Village, Zhejiang Province, the concept conveys the mutually-reinforcing relationship between environmental protection and economic development. Although the concept has attracted increasing attention worldwide, existing work has mainly concentrated on policy discourse and macro-level communication strategies. Less attention has been paid to the role of grassroots participants. Taking Yucun as the example, this article examines how the concept moves from local practice into international discourse. As a result, this article proposes a three-layer communication mechanism, consisting of policy-level discourse, the diffusion of rural development practices, and farmer-centered storytelling. Specifically, this article argues that farmers are not only recipients of ecological transformation but also important narrators engaging in the transformation, helping turn national ecological discourse into concrete and emotionally meaningful forms. In this way, the study demonstrates the comprehensive approach of how a local ecological practice is developed into a broader global narrative through communication across multiple levels.

Keywords

ecological civilization, Two Mountains concept, international communication, grassroots narratives, Yucun Village

1. Introduction

The phrase "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets", now widely known as the "Two Mountains" concept, has moved from a local practice into one of the most recognized expressions in

China's ecological policy discourse. Proposed by President Xi during a visit in 2005, it is closely associated with Yucun Village in Anji County, Zhejiang Province. Yucun is regarded as not just the starting point but the demonstration of concept, entering public discussion. The village has shifted from traditional production toward ecological restoration and new development paths.

The importance of the concept lies in both its political significance and environmental-friendly logic. Instead of treating environmental protection as a constraint on growth, it outlines ecological development as a key resource for long-term prosperity. The concept has gained increasing attention in broader discussions on topics including rural revitalization, sustainable development and so on. During the process, international organizations and media reports have contributed to the strengthened visibility. For example, UNEP has drawn attention to Zhejiang's green rural revitalization efforts, while Yucun's later recognition in tourism and communication initiatives has made it more legible to audiences across the world. Recent Chinese research likewise argues that the "Two Mountains" concept should be understood not merely as a domestic governing principle, but also as an idea China places in wider debates on environmental governance (Ji, 2025).

Yet one issue remains relatively underexplored. Existing literature has paid considerable attention to policy interpretation, state discourse, institutional representation, and communication strategy, but has said less about to what extent ecological ideas become understandable through local experiences and narratives. In the case of the "Two Mountains" concept, this gap is worthy of special emphasis because its wider circulation in the global stage depends not only on official explanation, but also on whether it can be recognized as something lived, seen, and told among people.

This article therefore aims to address two related questions: how does the "Two Mountains" concept move from local practice into international discourse, and what role do farmers play during the process? Taking Yucun as a qualitative case study, this study finds that the concept circulates through three levels, including the interaction of policy discourse, the diffusion of rural development practice, and farmer-centered storytelling practices. By focusing on the third of these dimensions in particular, the article brings farmers, the grassroots participants, more clearly into the research scope on China's international environmental communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The "Two Mountains" Concept*

Ecological civilization is now embedded in China's environmental governance as a way of linking ecological protection with broader questions of development, including economic restructuring and social well-being. As Geall and Ely (2018) argue, it should not be reduced to a policy slogan. The term refers, more concretely, to pathways through which sustainability is imagined and pursued in contemporary China. The "Two Mountains" concept is one expression of that broader framework. What gives it particular analytical value here is its attempt to bring ecological and developmental value into the same argument, which helps explain why it appears so frequently in discussions of rural

transition and social transformation. Ji (2025) further suggests that the concept is not best understood only within the boundaries of domestic policy. It can also be read as part of China's contribution to global environmental governance, especially insofar as it presents sustainability as a practical rather than purely normative project. Read this way, the issue is not only how the concept is implemented within China, but how it becomes legible beyond China as it moves across different settings.

2.2 International Communication of Development Narratives

Development ideas do not circulate through official statements alone. They are also carried by narrative forms that make abstract principles recognizable as social experience. This matters especially in environmental communication. Without some grounding in local practice, such concepts often remain at the level of policy language. Much of the existing literature on China's international communication, however, has focused more heavily on diplomatic discourse and national image construction. The role of local communities in making development ideas communicable has received less sustained attention. This issue becomes sharper in the case of the global communication of the "Two Mountains" concept. Part of its wider appeal seems to lie in the way it reworks the relationship between environmental protection and development. Yucun is useful here not because it simply represents the concept, but because it offers a local setting in which that relationship can be observed rather than merely asserted (He & Wang, 2025). Existing studies also indicate that international communication cannot be reduced to linguistic translation alone. That is too narrow an account of how concepts move. Ideas travel across borders only when they can be interpreted within different political contexts, development experiences, and frameworks of understanding (He & Wang, 2025; Ji, 2025). The question, then, is not just whether the concept can be conveyed, but under what conditions it becomes intelligible and capable of generating resonance in different communicative environments.

2.3 Grassroots Narratives and Research Gap

Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that contemporary social reality is shaped through processes of mediation. If that is the case, local participants cannot be treated as peripheral to communication. They are involved in the making of public meaning itself. Grassroots storytelling, therefore, should not be separated from organizational communication. The two are closely connected. It is precisely this connection that can strengthen the social visibility and credibility of official discourse. This point is especially relevant to the research on the international communication of ecological civilization. Existing studies suggest that communication around Xi's Thought on Ecological Civilization, including the "Two Mountains" concept, remains stronger in policy explanation than in narrative presentation across different contexts (Xun & Song, 2026). What this points to is a research gap: policy discourse has already received considerable attention worldwide, but we know much less about how local participants contribute to making ecological ideas tangible. Specifically, how the grassroots help turn abstract ideas into concrete, grounded practices. Farmers matter here. They are visible participants in ecological transformation, helping to turn high-level policy language into understandable, experience-based narration.

According to Zhao and Chen (2024) the cross-cultural communication pathway should not be limited to the one-way export of concepts. It should be understood as a communicative process shaped by participants in different scenarios. In this sense, the study views Yucun Village not simply as the birthplace of a governing idea, but as a communicative setting in which ecological change and economic development are interpreted by local people in their daily life.

3. Methodology

This study takes Yucun Village as its core case for the reason that it is officially recognized as the birthplace of the “Two Mountains” concept. Since then, it has acquired a symbolic status and holds a visible place in discussions of rural ecological transition in contemporary China. It is a model village representing China’s ecological growth in both domestic policy discourse and international communication. Its inclusion in the UNWTO “Best Tourism Villages” list in 2021, for instance, further underscores its relevance as a case that shows how local ecological transition and economic development can be integrated. Then in 2024, the establishment of the Anji (Yucun) Ecological Civilization International Communication Center means these stories are going to be shared with wider audiences on the global stage.

The article relies on qualitative analysis of publicly available materials, such as official explanations of the “Two Mountains” concept. Announcement of institutional initiatives and media reports of Yucun’s ecological transition outcomes have been used for analysis as well to interpret the local practices associated with the village. Instead of quantitative measurement of communication effect, the analysis in this study focuses on how the stories of Yucun are shared across different settings. Here the aim is not to treat Yucun as a representative of all rural ecological transformation cases in China, but to clarify how a local development experience can be elevated into a broader international narrative and made meaningful through multi-level communication efforts.

4. Conceptual Framework

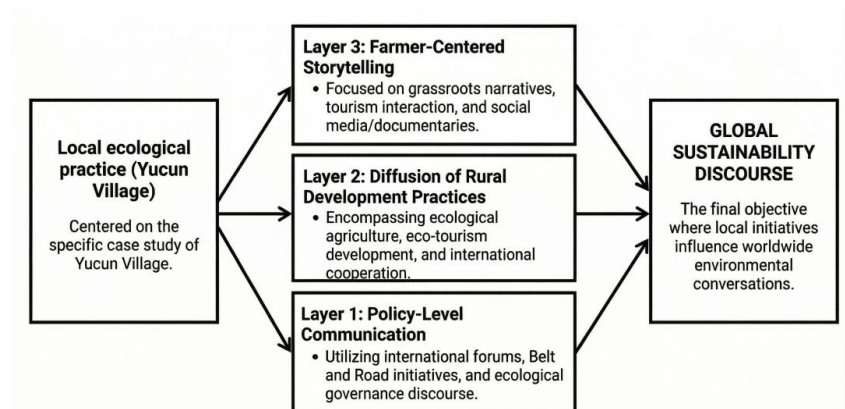


Figure 1. Three-layer Model of the International Communication of the “Two Mountains”

Concept

Figure 1 above presents the three-layer model proposed by this article to analyze the international communication of the “Two-Mountains” concept with Yucun Village’s practices as the focus. This model suggests that the international communication of the “Two Mountains” concept does not follow a single top-down channel. On the contrary, local ecological practice is converted into a wider narrative through the interaction of three communicative layers, including national policy discourse at the macro level, circulation of rural development practices in the middle, and micro-level grassroots storytelling by rural participants. Each of these layers has distinctive features on their own, yet they are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. Policy discourse provides conceptual framework and backs legitimacy of sustainable development practices. Diffusion of local experience offers visible and concrete evidence to support the policy, while the grassroots storytelling creates narrative accessibility and arouses emotional resonance among people.

5. Discussion

5.1 Policy-Level Communication

First of all, at the macro level, the “Two Mountains” concept gains legitimacy and visibility through official discourse and institutional framing. In the global stage, English-language materials issued by the State Council present it as a key expression of China’s ecological civilization agenda and as a principle which links ecological protection and eco-social development. This level lays the foundation by placing the concept within a wider governance vision rather than leaving it as a stand-alone local slogan. In communicative terms, policy discourse contributes to the wide global recognition of the concept so that the concept becomes recognizable to both domestic and international audiences. It also creates the contextual conditions under which local cases such as Yucun can later be cited as representative examples. Therefore, this layer is stronger in definition and political authority by clarifying what the concept means within a policy framework, but it does not by itself make the concept vivid or socially textured. In that sense, the lack of narrative immediacy makes the other two layers necessary for relating the concept to social practices

5.2 Diffusion of Rural Development Practices

The second layer concentrates on the circulation of development practices associated with the concept. Yucun is often presented as a place with integrated practices of ecological restoration, rural tourism, and green transition moving away from environmentally damaging industries. UNEP’s discussion of Zhejiang’s Green Rural Revival Programme similarly frames the broader regional transformation in terms of ecological recovery and community benefit, reinforcing the connection between environmental governance and local development. In addition, Yucun’s visibility has been enhanced through international recognition. As introduced, in 2021, UNWTO included Yucun among its “Best Tourism Villages”, marking an important shift from domestic model village to internationally legible example of green transition. This recognition by an established international platform indicates global exposure of a local practice and allows the possibility of easier and more circulation of local

experiences. This layer is significant because it is the practical embodiment of the “Two Mountains” concept. Yucun does not simply illustrate or represent policy success. This village, with its obvious achievements, shows how environmental rehabilitation can be narrated as a source of renewed livelihood and social development.

5.3 Farmer-Centered Storytelling

The third layer, and the one most central to this article, centers on the role of grassroots participants, i.e. farmers and local residents, in narrating ecological transformation. As Yucun moved from traditional industry to tourism and an ecological economy, villagers increasingly became an essential part of the story through tourists’ interaction, local guiding, and other mediated forms of presentation. Public reports often condense this green transition into the phrase “from selling stones to selling scenery”, turning structural change into a concise and memorable narrative.

This layer is not just about representation. It is also about communicative translation. Farmers’ lived personal experience gives material substance to abstract policy language. Through face-to-face interaction in tourism, and other mediated forms such as documentaries, short videos and even live-streaming, villagers help present ecological transformation as something embedded in ordinary life, a daily practice rather than as an administrative formula or policies. In 2024, local authorities established the Anji (Yucun) Ecological Civilization International Communication Center, a broader international communication platform that can explicitly share Yucun’s local experience with wider audiences .

Farmer-centered storytelling helps explain why Yucun is more communicable and understandable than many other policy cases. Local narratives make ecological change visible, traceable, and emotionally intelligible. Moreover, it is relatable, allowing audiences to recognize not only the idea of ecological civilization, but also its consequences for work, livelihood, landscape, and community identity. At the same time, such storytelling should not be romanticized as entirely spontaneous or independent. Much of it is amplified with institutional and media supports, such as well-structured documentaries, and the use of short-video platforms. Grassroots communication in this case is therefore best understood as social narration rather than purely bottom-up expression.

6. Conclusion

The Yucun case suggests that the international communication of the “Two Mountains” concept operates through a layered process rather than a simple one-way transmission of policy language. Official discourse remains important because it establishes the concept’s political and strategic significance. Yet such visibility, on its own, does not guarantee communicative reach. The concept appears to travel more effectively when it is anchored in specific places, lived practices, and narratives that are intelligible beyond policy discourse. From this perspective, Yucun is analytically useful not merely because of its symbolic status, but because it shows how an ecological idea can be made interpretable through concrete developmental experience. What seems to matter, then, is less the

abstract formulation of the concept itself than the extent to which it becomes socially recognizable in rural life.

The study also clarifies the role of local participants in environmental communication. Farmers, or local narrators, are not just symbols of rural change. They participate and witness the change. They are part of the process through which ecological discourse becomes publicly meaningful. Their role is especially important as it transforms official language into recognizable and understandable social experience, so that broader ecological claims become easier to grasp.

Farmers are important narrators, but their narratives circulate through institutionally mediated channels. The Yucun case shows that grassroots narratives do not circulate on their own. Their broader visibility depends on the forms or media of communication, as well as organizational support. This helps explain why top-down and bottom-up communication should not be treated as separate or opposing tracks. In the Yucun case, local storytelling does not replace official discourse. It's communicative force comes from the way the three layers are articulated together, with each shaping how the others are received and interpreted. They work together, though not always in equal ways.

The case also has a cross-cultural implication. International communication, as Zhao and Chen (2024) note, is not exhausted by translation in the narrow linguistic sense. A concept may be translated accurately and still remain distant or unconvincing if the receiving context cannot relate it to any recognizable experience. What Yucun shows, at least to some extent, is how local ecological practice can be turned into a mediated narrative that travels beyond its place of origin. This does not mean that such a narrative will be understood in the same way everywhere, or that one village can stand for all of rural China. It suggests, more modestly, that international intelligibility often depends on whether a locally rooted practice can be narrated in ways that others find interpretable.

Taken together, this article argues for a three-layer process in the international communication of the "Two Mountains" concept: policy discourse, the diffusion of local practice, and the circulation of farmer-centered storytelling. This study does not claim that this process is complete or universally applicable, nor suggest that Yucun provides a general model for all cases of rural ecological transformation in China. As a single-case qualitative study, this article can only offer a limited analytical explanation. Its contribution is to make more visible one communicative mechanism: ecological ideas are more likely to travel when they are embodied in local life and narrated through forms that connect policy language with social experience. Future research may extend this discussion further through comparative studies or closer examination of multilingual international environmental communication.

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