

Reclaiming the Red-Crowned Crane as Chinese: Ecological Modernization and Environmental Protection in China's Long 1970s.

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In 1979, China promulgated its first Environmental Protection Law as part of the Four Modernizations. Between 1979 and 1988, the Chinese government promoted a series of environmental protection laws, including the Marine Environment Protection Law (1984) and the Wildlife Protection Law (1988). These new laws unified previously fragmented conservation measures under the term “environmental protection” (*huanjing baohu*), replacing the Maoist-era term “nature protection” (*ziran baohu*), which had prevailed from the late 1950s to the 1960s in government documents and scientific discourse. By investigating discussions surrounding environmental protection across the 1978 divide, this paper provides insights into China's ecological modernity during the long 1970s, focusing on the conservation of one key species in Northeast China: the red-crowned crane.

The Red-crowned crane (*Grus japonensis*) is a large, beautiful crane species distributed in parts of China, Korea, Japan, and Russia. It is recognized as an internationally endangered species. The history of red-crowned crane conservation in China seems to follow the conventional storyline of environmentally ignorant Mao-era China: there was no state attempt to protect these endangered birds until the beginning of the reform era. Some scholars argue that there is little record of the bird's distribution, population, and ecology prior to the 1980s. Indeed, red-crowned cranes were almost absent in wildlife protection records of the Northeast during the 1950s and the 1960s. Despite being an endangered species native to Northeast China, they did not receive attention from provincial officials like other endangered species of the region: Amur tigers, sika deer, red deer, and river otters. They were not included in the wildlife protection policies that began in the early 1960s.

Red-crowned cranes, which had received little attention from local cadres in the 1960s, became a primary focus of environmental protection policies and a marker of modernization in the early reform era. Conservation efforts directed toward these birds were exemplified by the construction of nature reserves between 1979 and 1985—the first state-led efforts to protect this endangered species. By historicizing red-crowned crane conservation, this paper suggests that analyzing the long 1970s, rather than seeing 1978 as a rupture, better captures the shifts that determined the fate of species like the red-crowned crane in the final years of the Cultural Revolution. By examining the rise of environmental protection discourse in the long 1970s, this paper explores how ecological modernization connected socialist conservation policies with post-socialist discussions.

Several key shifts in Chinese perceptions of nature and conservation occurred in the long 1970s, including heightened concerns over pollution, the institutionalization of environmental protection enforcement, a growing understanding of ecosystems, and the rise of panda diplomacy.

The shift from nature protection to environmental protection in the 1970s repositioned humans within a complex ecological web. In the early 1970s, the concept “environmental protection” began to emerge, eventually supplanting the term “nature protection” that was used in the 1950s

and 1960s. In China, the concept of “environmental protection” had an inseparable relation to “environmental pollution” (*huanjing wuran*). Pollution was increasingly discussed both internationally and domestically in the early 1970s, with domestic discussions warning Chinese people that a polluted environment could make humans ill and kill them. Such a frightening vision changed the ways in which Chinese people perceived the relationships humans made with the surrounding natural environment.

There were both internal and external forces behind the emergence of environmental protection in China during the 1970s. Chinese scientists paid close attention to international attention to pollution, especially in capitalist nations. For Chinese scientists, pollution problems in the First World presented a horrifying future, while their protection measures provided models to follow. In the early 1970s, China also participated in the global policymaking of environmental protection. In 1972, China joined the international discussions on environmental protection by attending the UN Stockholm Conference. At the conference, representatives formed a global consensus on how to deal with the human impact on the environment and how to best preserve the environment. The internal force behind the emergence of environmental protection discourse was the environmental destruction and pollution from which Chinese people also suffered. During the 1970s, water and air pollution in China was a serious concern for the Chinese government.

The move to establish red-crowned crane reserves also showed an enhanced understanding of the habitat destruction that could endanger red-crowned cranes, reflecting the heightened concerns about the diverse reasons behind the destruction of the environment in the Environmental Protection Law (1979). The establishment of red-crowned crane conservation sites in Northeast China reflected the diversification of scientific methods, heightened attention to habitat preservation, and efforts to maintain ecological balance. Meanwhile, the state’s long-standing interest in captive breeding and domestication, dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, persisted in red-crowned crane conservation during the reform era.

The emergence of red-crowned cranes as conservation targets in the 1970s also reveals how changing political priorities shaped the state’s use of certain species. Depictions of red-crowned cranes reinforced their association with nationalism. In the boom in writings on red-crowned cranes, the cranes became associated with Chinese culture and history as a way to claim these birds as Chinese. The historical research on red-crowned cranes that situated the birds in ancient text such as *Book of Songs* justified that red-crowned cranes belonged to China despite the foreign efforts to protect this internationally endangered species.

During the process of integrating red-crowned cranes into Chinese culture and history in the early reform era, Northeast China—where the cranes had been largely ignored for over two decades—emerged as the “hometown of the red-crowned cranes.” The fact that red-crowned cranes, which spend winter in China, had their primary breeding grounds within Chinese territory reinforced the notion that China was their true home. This rhetoric strengthened the idea that, as inherently Chinese birds, red-crowned cranes would always return to Northeast China, no matter how far they traveled. The establishment of Zhanglang Nature Reserve in Heilongjiang in 1979 provided an official home for the species. The reserve was romanticized as a sanctuary for red-crowned cranes, fostering an idealized vision of human-crane interactions. Followed by the

increasing association of red-crowned cranes with Chinese people, a novel type of relationship between red-crowned cranes and contemporary local people emerged in the early 1980s. Creating nature reserves specifically for red-crowned cranes provided a new way for people to interact with the birds in Northeast China. It engendered a portrayal of Northeast locals as both protectors and friends of the species.

By situating environmental protection within the context of the long 1970s, this paper contributes to broader discussions on environmental modernity in China and the intersections of politics, conservation science, and ecology. Ultimately, it aims to reveal the complexities of China's environmental modernization during the transition from socialism to capitalism.