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Research on Environmental Legal Challenges in Trans-boundary Water Resource Management of the Yellow River Basin

Jing Wang, Ning Liu

LAW SCHOOL OF Lanzhou University of Technology, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730050, China

Abstract: ***The Yellow River Basin, as a critical water resource supply area in China, faces multiple environmental legal challenges in trans-boundary water resource management. By outlining the characteristics of water resources in the Yellow River Basin, this study reveals the current issues of water scarcity and pollution in the basin. Through case studies, textual analysis, and comparative analysis, the study examines the legal issues associated with these challenges and investigates the causes and potential solutions for transboundary water resource governance in the Yellow River Basin. By reviewing the legal framework, it identifies inconsistencies in application and deficiencies in cooperative mechanisms. The study proposes recommendations to improve legislation, strengthen inter-provincial cooperation, enhance public participation, and enforce environmental accountability, aiming to optimize management and promote sustainable development.***

Keywords: Yellow River Basin; Trans-boundary Water Resources; Environmental Law.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Yellow River Basin covers a vast area, spanning multiple provinces. Protecting water resources in this region is a critical component of the new era's Yellow River governance efforts. However, with rapid economic development and population growth, the Yellow River Basin faces dual challenges of water scarcity and worsening environmental pollution. Against this backdrop, the rational allocation and sustainable management of water resources have become pivotal issues for regional development. Notably, the legal challenges concerning the allocation, utilization, and protection of water resources across the provinces within the basin are increasingly prominent, underscoring the importance of trans-boundary water resource management. Currently, water resource management in the Yellow River Basin is governed by multiple layers of legal regulation, primarily including the Water Law of the People's Republic of China, the Environmental Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, the Yellow River Protection Law of the People's Republic of China, as well as a range of local laws and regulations. However, due to disparities in the application of these laws and intensifying regional conflicts of interest, contradictions and coordination challenges frequently arise in the practical management of water resources.

This paper aims to analyze the environmental legal challenges of trans-boundary water resource management in the Yellow River Basin, exploring their causes and impacts and proposing targeted solutions. Through a review of the current situation and case studies, this study seeks to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for optimizing trans-boundary water resource management in the Yellow River Basin, ultimately promoting sustainable regional development. Addressing the legal challenges in the Yellow River Basin will enhance the efficiency of trans-boundary water resource management, achieving a win-win situation for both ecological and economic progress.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF WATER RESOURCES IN THE YELLOW RIVER BASIN

The Yellow River Basin, a vital water resource area in China, has a complex hydro-logical profile due to its unique geographic and climatic conditions. As a cradle of civilization, the Yellow River plays a significant role in both economic and ecological spheres. However, economic and population growth have intensified water resource challenges in the basin, exacerbating issues of uneven distribution, strong seasonality, severe pollution, and ecological vulnerability, which increase management complexity.

2.1 Geographic and Ecological Overview of the Yellow River Basin

Located in northern China, the Yellow River Basin spans a vast area of 750,000 square kilometers, covering

multiple provinces, including Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Henan, and Shandong. Originating from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Yellow River traverses mountains and hills before reaching plains. The basin is biologically diverse yet ecologically fragile; the upper reaches are characterized by grasslands and mountains, the middle reaches by agricultural fields, and the lower reaches by wetlands and lakes. Human activities, pollution, and climate change have led to significant ecological degradation, creating severe water scarcity and soil erosion challenges that pose considerable obstacles to resource management.

2.2 Distribution and Current Utilization of Water Resources in the Yellow River Basin

The Yellow River Basin suffers from a scarcity of water resources, with uneven temporal and spatial distribution, including both intra-annual and inter-annual variability. The upstream regions, such as Qinghai and Gansu, are relatively well-supplied, whereas the midstream areas of Shaanxi and Shanxi and downstream areas of Henan and Shandong face considerable water scarcity, creating a significant supply-demand imbalance. Furthermore, water resources exhibit clear seasonal usage patterns: precipitation is concentrated in the summer months, while shortages are more pronounced during the winter and spring seasons, impacting agricultural and urban water supplies. The basin is densely populated, with per capita water availability far below the national average, particularly in the midstream and downstream regions where supply-demand tensions are most acute. Currently, the primary use of water resources is for agricultural irrigation; however, with the rapid pace of industrialization and urbanization, the demand for industrial and municipal water has surged, further intensifying pressure on the water resources in the basin.

3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE YELLOW RIVER BASIN

The primary objectives of basin-wide water resource management are to achieve sustainable use of water resources, maintain ecological health, and support coordinated socio-economic development. Water resource management in the Yellow River Basin involves numerous provinces, each with distinct needs for utilization and conservation, adding complexity to the construction of a cohesive legal framework. Scientific technical methods and a comprehensive legal and regulatory system are essential for realizing sustainable resource use. Currently, water resource management in the Yellow River Basin is governed by multiple layers of national legislation, including the Water Law of the People's Republic of China, the Yellow River Protection Law, the Environmental Protection Law, and various regional regulations. However, differences in legal application and regional interests have led to significant management conflicts. Although international frameworks, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses, provide guidance for coordinating interests, numerous challenges remain in their implementation.

3.1 Overview of Domestic Laws and Regulations on Transboundary Water Resource Management

Water resource management in the Yellow River Basin is regulated by several key domestic laws, including the Water Law of the People's Republic of China, which delineates management principles, establishes water rights, and emphasizes rational utilization alongside conservation. The Environmental Protection Law provides a foundational framework for environmental protection, underscoring the integration of ecological considerations within water management. The Water Pollution Prevention and Control Law specifically addresses water pollution, stipulating responsibilities, measures, and legal liabilities, thereby offering legal support for water quality protection. The implementation of the Yellow River Protection Law provides a legal basis for collaborative governance within the basin and holds significant guiding value for practical operations. Additionally, local regulations complement national laws according to regional realities, forming a comprehensive management mechanism. Collectively, these laws constitute the framework for water resource management in the Yellow River Basin, establishing a foundation for transboundary management.

3.2 International Legal Framework for Transboundary Water Resource Management

The international legal context for the Yellow River Basin is primarily reflected in several key international treaties and principles, which, while not directly applicable to the Yellow River, provide valuable references for transboundary water resource management. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses aims to promote the reasonable and sustainable use and protection of international rivers, laying the groundwork for the sustainable management of transboundary water resources. The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes

proposes management principles that encourage cooperation among states to ensure the equitable and sustainable use of water resources. The International Law Commission's Draft Articles on the Law of Transboundary Aquifers emphasize equitable distribution, environmental protection, and consideration of downstream states, offering guidance for management practices. Furthermore, bilateral and multilateral agreements, based on shared interests, promote collaboration on water resource and environmental protection within the basin. Although these frameworks are not directly applicable, they provide essential legal and cooperative models for transboundary management in the Yellow River Basi.

4. CURRENT STATUS OF TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT IN THE YELLOW RIVER BASIN

The Yellow River Basin spans multiple provinces, highlighting the complexity and diversity of water resource management and underscoring the urgency of transboundary management. Rapid economic and population growth has led to a surge in water resource demand within the basin, placing immense pressure on distribution and utilization, thereby making provincial water resource management policies and practices crucial.

4.1 Water Resource Management Policies of Various Provinces

Provinces within the Yellow River Basin implement distinctive water resource management policies tailored to their specific conditions. Qinghai focuses on water source protection and ecological restoration by establishing "water source conservation areas" to promote sustainable development. Gansu emphasizes the rational allocation of water resources, promoting agricultural irrigation reforms and enhancing water-saving irrigation technologies. Ningxia prioritizes "water conservation first," unifying the management and allocation of water resources to facilitate equitable agricultural and industrial water use. Shaanxi enhances comprehensive management by implementing an ecological compensation mechanism for rivers, focusing on soil and water conservation and ecological construction. Shanxi emphasizes water pollution prevention, establishing stringent water quality standards and strengthening industrial wastewater management. Henan focuses on coordinated planning, promoting a water-saving society through "water-based production" policies that optimize agricultural water use. Shandong advances efficient and circular utilization of water resources, strengthening pollution prevention and establishing a long-term management mechanism. While these policies each have their specific emphases, they collectively aim for the sustainable use of water resources and ecological protection.

4.2 Water Rights Allocation and Conflicts

Significant disparities exist among the provinces regarding water resource endowment and usage demands, leading to an imbalance in water rights allocation, particularly between upstream provinces rich in water resources and downstream provinces with high water demand. As economic development accelerates in downstream areas, the continuous increase in water resource demand starkly contrasts with the need for balance between ecological protection and water resource utilization in upstream regions, exacerbating water rights conflicts. Additionally, the lack of uniformity and coordination in water resource management policies across provinces makes practical operations prone to conflicts and competition. Furthermore, issues of unfair water rights allocation and disputes over usage volumes have led to frequent inter-provincial conflicts regarding water rights, affecting regional stability and cooperation. Currently, the mechanisms for mediating cross-border water rights and resolving disputes remain inadequate, making it difficult to effectively address water rights conflicts and further hindering rational water resource utilization and management.

4.3 Conflicts Between Ecological Protection and Economic Development

The conflict between economic development and ecological protection is particularly pronounced in the Yellow River Basin. Large-scale hydraulic projects and agricultural development activities create a substantial demand for water and land resources, often leading to neglect of ecological environments, resulting in ecological degradation and water resource depletion. Over-exploitation within the basin diminishes the carrying capacity of ecosystems, reduces biodiversity, and deteriorates ecological conditions, which in turn restricts sustainable economic development. As economic growth continues, water resource demands rise, particularly during dry seasons, intensifying competition for water resources among regions and potentially triggering conflicts. Some local governments prioritize short-term economic benefits at the expense of long-term ecological gains, leading to enduring consequences of ecological damage that adversely affect sustainable economic development. Moreover, insufficient enforcement and oversight of ecological protection policies, along with the absence of coordinated

mechanisms for transboundary management, hinder the effective implementation of ecological protection measures.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL LEGAL CHALLENGES IN TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN THE YELLOW RIVER BASIN

Transboundary water resource governance in the Yellow River Basin faces multiple environmental legal challenges that pertain not only to the applicability of laws and regulations but also to the coordination and cooperation of interests among various provinces. Issues such as water resource scarcity, severe pollution, and ecological degradation are becoming increasingly pronounced, necessitating the establishment of an effective legal framework to address these challenges. The existing segmented management mechanisms are inadequate to meet the holistic protection and governance requirements of the Yellow River Basin, and current provincial legislation often exhibits superficiality and fragmentation, leading to insufficient legislative supply.

5.1 Issues of Inconsistent Legal Applicability

Provinces have developed differentiated water resource management regulations and policies based on local circumstances. The variations in the content and implementation of these local regulations have resulted in a lack of uniformity in water resource management standards, thereby increasing the complexity of transboundary management. In disputes over cross-province water resources, the relevant laws and regulations stem from different local and national levels, lacking clear applicability criteria. This ambiguity and uncertainty in legal applicability diminish the efficiency of dispute resolution. While there are national frameworks such as the "Water Law of the People's Republic of China" and the "Environmental Protection Law," the absence of cross-provincial cooperation and coordination mechanisms often leads provinces to act independently, with insufficient collaborative management. Conflicts of interest among provinces in water resource utilization lead to divergent interpretations and implementations of legal provisions, further exacerbating the lack of consistency in legal applicability. Additionally, due to the absence of unified legal applicability standards and effective regulatory systems, local governments may selectively enforce laws, undermining the authority and effectiveness of the law.

5.2 Insufficient Transboundary Cooperation Mechanisms

The provinces within the basin exhibit a decentralized state of water resource management, lacking a unified transboundary coordination agency to oversee planning and management, which results in inefficient resource allocation and policy implementation. In terms of water resource monitoring, data collection, and management, there exist information barriers among provinces, with underdeveloped information-sharing mechanisms. This leads to a lack of sufficient foundational data to support decision-making and governance, thus limiting the effectiveness of cooperation. The differing interests of provinces in economic development and ecological protection, combined with a lack of common goals and visions, weaken cooperative intentions and highlight opposing interests. The existing legal frameworks exert insufficient constraints and enforcement regarding transboundary cooperation, with unclear responsibilities and obligations for all parties involved, leading to suboptimal cooperation outcomes. Furthermore, the scarcity of water resources and competition for economic development intensify interprovincial conflicts of interest, further diminishing the willingness to cooperate in water resource management and ecological protection.

5.3 Challenges in Water Pollution and Environmental Liability

The indivisible public good nature and significant negative externalities of transboundary water resources make traditional regional governance methods less suitable for managing cross-border water pollution. In the context of dynamic water flow within the basin, identifying pollution sources and attributing responsibility becomes particularly complex. Given that water typically flows from upstream to downstream, pollution sources may be hidden in upstream areas, yet their negative effects can widely impact downstream regions. This complicates the subsequent tracing of responsibility, making it difficult to accurately pinpoint the precise location of the pollution source and the corresponding liable entities. Water pollution cases involving multiple provinces exhibit significant legal complexity, as differences in laws and regulations among provinces hinder the establishment of a unified legal applicability framework, thereby obstructing effective enforcement of liability determination and penalties.

In cross-border pollution incidents, evidence collection also faces numerous challenges. On one hand, the timely nature of pollution actions means that evidence may disappear over time; on the other hand, geographical

constraints further complicate evidence gathering, making it more difficult to pursue environmental accountability. More critically, the current mechanisms for cross-provincial cooperation and coordination remain underdeveloped, leading provinces to often act independently in addressing water pollution issues, which undermines their capacity for collaborative action. This not only weakens the enforcement of governance measures but also affects the effectiveness of accountability processes. Furthermore, public supervision and participation in water pollution incidents need to be enhanced. The low level of public engagement results in a lack of robust social oversight mechanisms during accountability processes, making it difficult to impose effective constraints and deterrents on polluters.

6. CASE ANALYSIS OF TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

6.1 Successful Transboundary Management Case

The "Rhine River Governance" project in Germany serves as a successful example of transnational water resource management, involving Germany, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Through the signing of the "Rhine River Convention," these countries established a transnational cooperation mechanism, holding regular meetings to collaboratively formulate water resource management policies. The project focuses on pollution control, water quality improvement, and ecological restoration, implementing stringent discharge standards and undertaking wetland restoration and ecological protection measures. Additionally, it enhances public participation and environmental awareness, resulting in significant improvements in the ecological health and water quality of the Rhine River.

6.2 Failed Management Case and Analysis of Causes

The "Indus Water Dispute" between India and Pakistan revolves around the allocation and utilization of water resources from the Indus River and its tributaries. This dispute primarily stems from the "Indus Water Treaty" signed in 1960, which delineates the usage rights of water resources between India and Pakistan. The failure of mediation in the Indus Water Dispute is mainly due to the lack of effective communication mechanisms, leading to poor information exchange and deepening misunderstandings. Moreover, the difficulties in implementing the treaty arise from inadequate regulatory and sanctioning measures. Additionally, water resource issues are often politicized, and the historical animosity and distrust between the two nations diminish the willingness to cooperate. As economic development intensifies the demand for water resources, competition escalates, further exacerbating the dispute.

7. SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCE GOVERNANCE IN THE YELLOW RIVER BASIN

To enhance cooperation and coordination among provinces in the Yellow River Basin, it is essential to design and implement scientific policies. This involves analyzing the current inadequacies in legal, policy, and management mechanisms and proposing concrete recommendations, including the improvement of legal frameworks, establishment of cross-provincial cooperation mechanisms, enhancement of public participation, and implementation of ecological protection measures. These measures aim to provide feasible pathways for sustainable water resource management in the Yellow River Basin, promoting a win-win scenario for economic development and ecological protection.

7.1 Improving the Legal and Regulatory System

In the process of advancing the water resource management system, the primary task is to develop clearer and more detailed unified regulations based on the "Yellow River Protection Law" to define the management rights and responsibilities of provinces and establish uniform standards, ensuring non-discriminatory legal applicability. There is a need to enhance the coherence of local regulations, requiring provinces to formulate supporting local rules based on national laws, ensuring compatibility with superior laws and regulations from other regions to effectively avoid contradictions and management vacuums.

To address water pollution prevention and control, stricter and more targeted laws and regulations concerning water pollution in the Yellow River Basin should be enacted, detailing pollution discharge standards and

establishing clear accountability systems to strengthen water quality protection. A legal support system for cross-provincial cooperation should be constructed, establishing cooperation principles and terms to promote information sharing, collaborative management, and balanced interests. Additionally, it is vital to strengthen the legal enforcement and supervision system to ensure effective implementation of water resource management laws, highlighting the seriousness and authority of the law.

7.2 Strengthening Interprovincial Cooperation Mechanisms

To enhance cross-provincial collaboration in water resource management within the Yellow River Basin, a specialized cross-provincial coordination mechanism should be established, such as a cross-provincial coordination committee. This body would assume the responsibility of integrated water resource management and coordination, organizing regular meetings to strengthen information sharing and communication channels among provinces. It is important to encourage provinces to sign a unified water resource management agreement, clearly defining the principles of resource allocation and usage, as well as accountability, ensuring consensus on resource management strategies.

Establishing a unified water resource monitoring and data-sharing platform is critical, enabling real-time updates and sharing of data to provide robust support for scientific decision-making, thus improving the transparency and accuracy of decisions. Through effective organization, negotiation, and consultation, pilot projects for interprovincial ecological compensation should be initiated. In addressing water pollution and ecological protection, provinces need to clarify their responsibilities and obligations in water pollution prevention according to the "Yellow River Protection Law" and related regulations. Specific measures should be collaboratively promoted across various sectors, including industrial, agricultural, and urban-rural pollution control. Industrial enterprises should be subjected to stringent discharge standards and regulatory frameworks, promoting industrial upgrading and technological transformation, as well as encouraging the adoption of clean production technologies to enhance resource utilization efficiency. For agricultural non-point source pollution, ecological and organic agricultural practices should be promoted, alongside enhancing the research, development, and application of pollution control technologies. During collaborative governance, provinces should strengthen information sharing and joint law enforcement mechanisms to jointly combat environmental violations. Establishing a robust scheduling and reporting mechanism will enhance the monitoring and evaluation of key tasks, ensuring effective implementation of governance measures.

7.3 Enhancing Public Awareness and Capacity for Participation

To deepen public understanding of the importance of water resource management and ecological protection, environmental education and outreach strategies should be strengthened through a series of educational programs and promotional activities. A legal framework for public participation must be established, ensuring that citizens have sufficient rights to participate in water resource management, thus encouraging individuals, communities, and NGOs to engage actively in decision-making and oversight processes. A transparent information dissemination system should be developed, requiring that data, policies, and projects related to water resource management are publicly available, allowing the public to quickly access information and effectively participate in governance practices. Regular public consultation meetings and hearings should be held to incorporate public opinions and suggestions into water resource management policy planning, enabling substantial influence.

7.4 Strengthening Accountability for Environmental Responsibility

Effectively promoting water resource management and environmental protection requires establishing a comprehensive legal framework addressing water pollution and resource overuse. This framework should clearly define the legal responsibilities for various types of pollution and include corresponding punitive measures to significantly enhance the deterrent effect of the law and ensure its seriousness and enforceability. A cross-provincial environmental accountability tracing system should be developed, clearly delineating the responsibilities and authority of each province in water resource management to ensure a clear and traceable accountability chain, providing a solid institutional guarantee for cross-provincial environmental governance. Strengthening water quality monitoring and enforcement is crucial; a unified and efficient water quality monitoring network should be established, conducting regular water quality testing and pollution source investigations, intensifying the crackdown on water pollution violations, ensuring accountability for violations, and maintaining the health of water environments.

8. CONCLUSION

As an important water resource base in China, the Yellow River Basin faces complex legal challenges in transboundary water resource management. The existence of complex situations regarding water pollution, including unidirectional, bidirectional, and cross-flow scenarios, highlights the need for collaborative governance as an essential path to address transboundary water pollution issues and promote the green development of all stakeholders involved. In-depth analysis of aspects such as resource allocation, pollution control, and ecological protection reveals that the current legal and regulatory framework suffers from shortcomings in applicability, coordination, and enforceability. This not only affects the rational allocation of water resources but also constrains the sustainable development of the ecological environment.

To address these challenges, recommendations have been made to improve the legal and regulatory framework, strengthen interprovincial cooperation mechanisms, enhance public awareness and capacity for participation, and reinforce accountability for environmental responsibilities. Only through comprehensive policy measures and strengthened cooperation can a more solid legal guarantee for the transboundary governance of water resources in the Yellow River Basin be established.

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