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Investigating the Eco-Ethical Foundations of Organic Agriculture in China

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Abstract

This study investigates whether core eco-ethical principles—nature's intrinsic value, ecological interconnectedness, and intergenerational equity—serve as moral foundations for organic agriculture in China, and how they manifest in policy and practice. Through qualitative triangulation of academic literature (n = 24), policy documents (n = 10), and case studies of certified organic farms (n = 4), we find that (1) Eco-ethics provides robust theoretical justification; (2) Policies emphasize sustainability but instrumentalize nature's intrinsic value; (3) Farm practices align technically with ethics, yet operators prioritize market incentives over moral reasoning. We recommend integrating explicit ethical frameworks into certification standards and farmer education.

Introduction

At present, the world is facing severe ecological and environmental challenges, and it has become a consensus to promote the transformation of agriculture to sustainable development. Organic agriculture is playing an increasingly important role in this transformation due to its significant environmental friendliness. However, in addition to focusing on the technical standards and market benefits of organic agriculture, have we thought deeply about the deep concepts that underpin its development? Can the core principles of ecological ethics – the intrinsic value of nature, ecological wholeness, and inter-generational justice – be a solid moral foundation for organic agriculture? This issue has been discussed in Western academic circles, but there is relatively little research in China. As a country with the world's fourth-largest organic farming area, whether China's policies truly incorporate these ethical principles, and whether their organic farming practices reflect these concepts? In other words, the policy is more at the level of slogans, and the actual operators, such as farmers, are mainly concerned with technical standards and market returns, and lack of understanding of the ethical connotations behind them. These questions are the core questions that this study hopes to explore.

In order to explore these questions in depth, this study adopts a qualitative research approach, which is mainly through the in-depth interpretation and analysis of existing textual materials to gain understanding. Specifically, the study is carried out from three interrelated dimensions:

Theoretical level: In order to test whether the principles of ecological ethics can provide moral support for organic agriculture, I systematically sorted out 30 core Chinese and English literature published after 2010 and focusing on the topics of "ecological ethics" and "organic agriculture" (mainly from CNKI and Google Scholar). I read these documents carefully, paying special attention to and counting the keywords related to the three ethical principles. For example, "ecological protection", "biological rights", and "harmless farming" that reflect the "intrinsic value of nature"; "biodiversity", "ecosystems" and "crop rotation" that reflect "ecological integrity"; The frequency and context of the words "land conservation", "sustainability", and "future generations", which embody "inter-generational justice".

In order to understand the uptake of ecological ethics principles in Chinese policies, I selected 10 policy documents related to organic agriculture issued by Chinese governments at all levels as the object of

analysis. It includes 5 documents at the central level, from official websites such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and the National Development and Reform Commission; and five local-level documents that seek to cover different regions. These documents were issued after 2010. I also use the method of content analysis to interpret these policy texts in detail, and identify and count the frequency and specific expressions of the above three ethical principles and their related keywords.

This section is mainly case studies. In order to observe the embodiment of ecological ethics principles in real production activities, I selected four organic farms certified by the national or local government as case studies (covering the eastern region: Yangcheng Lake Farm in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, Chongming Farm in Shanghai; Western region: Sichuan Liangshan Dechang Farm, Yunnan Honghe Hani Terraced Regional Farm). Based on secondary information such as public practice reports, information from relevant industry associations, and news reports, the study analyzes the specific measures they take in actual production (e.g., whether chemicals are used, what farming patterns are used such as crop rotation/inter cropping/rice-fish symbiosis, how to improve the soil, etc.), and attempts to link these specific practices to the three major ecological ethical principles to see if and to what extent they embody these ethical concepts.

Through an in-depth analysis of the above three types of data, the following findings are mainly obtained:

At the theoretical level: An analysis of the academic literature shows that the three principles of ecological ethics are widely mentioned and discussed in 30 literature, and the total frequency of related keywords has reached a high frequency. Among them, concepts related to the "intrinsic value of nature", such as ecological protection and biological rights, appear many times. Concepts related to "ecological integrity", such as biodiversity and systems management, appear many times, and concepts related to "inter-generational justice", such as land conservation and sustainability, are also repeated. This suggests that there is a general consensus in the academic community that these ethical principles provide an important moral basis for the rationality of organic farming.

At the policy level: An analysis of policy texts reveals an imbalance. Both central and local policy documents attach great importance to "ecological integrity" and "inter-generational justice", and the combined proportion of these two types of principles is more than very high. However, the embodiment of "natural intrinsic value" is relatively weak and vague. This principle is explicitly mentioned or embodied many times in central and local policies, and these expressions are often attached to economic or resource use objectives (e.g., "protecting the ecological environment for sustainable use of resources"), failing to fully and independently emphasize the inherent dignity and value of nature itself.

An examination of the four case farms shows that they do take a number of eco-ethical measures in terms of specific production technologies. For example, all farms strictly avoid the use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, which can be seen as a practical respect for the "intrinsic value of nature"; The widespread use of crop rotation, inter-cropping and even rice-fish symbiosis and other composite farming models reflects the understanding of "ecological integrity", maintains the balance of the system

and biodiversity, and attaches importance to the protection and improvement of soil health through the application of organic fertilizer, compost, etc. This case reflects the concern for the long-term sustainable use of land resources, known as "inter-generational justice". However, a key and thought-provoking finding is that despite the ethical principles of these farms, the main drivers of farm operators seem to be more likely to come from the market's expectation of high premiums for organic products and access to government subsidies, and only a few have explicitly expressed their active recognition and recognition of ethical concepts such as "respect for nature itself" or "responsibility for future generations". This suggests that at the practical level, there is a clear disconnect between technical operations and a deep sense of ethics.

Based on the above findings, the value of this study is that: first, it proves that ecological ethical principles can indeed constitute a strong moral support for the development of organic agriculture in the Chinese Chinese context; Secondly, it reveals a key problem in the current development of organic agriculture in China - the "fault line between ethics, policy and practice": the "intrinsic value of nature" at the policy level is insufficient or even instrumentalized, and practitioners generally lack a deep understanding and internal recognition of the ethical connotation of organic agriculture. Therefore, this study suggests that, at the policy level, relevant regulations (such as the Administrative Measures for Organic Product Certification) should be revised and improved, and "respect for the intrinsic value of nature" should be clearly regarded as one of the core objectives; At the promotion level, it is necessary to strengthen the training of farm operators on ecological ethics and incorporate their understanding into the consideration system or continuing education requirements of organic certification. Of course, there are some limitations to this study, such as the limited number of farm cases selected, the reliance on secondary data may not adequately reflect the real thoughts and dilemmas of front-line practitioners, and the fact that some of the policy samples do not cover the most up-to-date policy developments, such as those in 2025. These deficiencies can be further explored in subsequent studies.

In summary, this study concludes that the development of organic agriculture in China is still in the stage of "technology first, ethics lagging". Ecological ethics provides a solid moral foundation, but this cornerstone has not yet been fully recognized and firmly laid in the current landscape of organic agriculture in China. In the future, it is necessary to focus on building a virtuous circle of "ethical concepts infiltrating policy formulation, policies effectively guiding production practice, and then deepening the subject's ethical cognition in practice", so as to truly realize the ethical value of organic agriculture as an important carrier of ecological civilization construction.

Ben Hassen et al. (2021) highlight the ethical challenges posed by crises like climate change and pandemics. They argue that food systems must be redesigned with moral resilience in mind—centered on justice, equity, and care. The paper positions organic agriculture as a compelling ethical response to structural fragilities.

Congreves (2025) links ethical theory directly to agricultural sustainability, proposing a framework that views farming decisions as moral acts. He argues that organic agriculture can be a conduit for

ecological justice when principles such as stewardship and intergenerational responsibility are explicitly acknowledged. His work provides an important normative basis for assessing the ethical performance of agricultural systems.

Darnhofer et al. (2010) examine the industrialization—or "conventionalisation"—of organic agriculture. They find that adherence to certification standards can sometimes displace the ethical spirit of the organic movement. The authors call for a shift from compliance to principle-based evaluation, encouraging deeper alignment with ecological ethics.

Daily and Söderqvist (2003) provide a foundational analysis of the distinction between the measurable value of nature and its deeper, non-economic worth. They emphasize that ethical and emotional connections to the environment play a central role in how societies treat natural systems, underscoring why organic farming must account for more than productivity alone.

Gamage et al. (2023) analyze how organic farming contributes to sustainable development in the Global South. They emphasize that ethical concerns—such as fairness, environmental justice, and food access—often underpin farmer and consumer support for organic models.

Gliessman (2014) presents agroecology as a scientific and moral approach to sustainable food systems. He argues that agroecological thinking naturally incorporates values such as biodiversity, justice, and co-responsibility. His work positions organic farming not merely as a technical alternative, but as a value-driven paradigm grounded in ecological ethics.

Himes et al. (2024) provide a systematic review of how intrinsic, instrumental, and relational values are conceptualized in environmental policy. They argue that relational and intrinsic values—those based on care, connection, and respect—are especially relevant for ethical agriculture. The authors highlight that organic farming can serve as a model for embedding value-based decision-making into ecological land management.

Kremen and Miles (2012) examine how diversified farming systems contribute to ecological resilience and social sustainability. The authors argue that organic agriculture must be embedded in a broader value-based system that emphasizes biodiversity, ecosystem services, and local knowledge. Their research highlights that ethics is not an external add-on to agricultural systems but an integral logic within ecologically and socially complex farming structures.

Leopold (1949) offers one of the earliest articulations of a land ethic, arguing that humans are members—not masters—of a broader ecological community. His philosophy provides a conceptual basis for viewing organic agriculture as a moral relationship with the land, rather than simply a method of food production.

Nielsen and Gamborg (2024) explore the dual role of eco-guilt and eco-shame as moral emotions in influencing environmental behavior. Their study shows that these emotions can either motivate pro-environmental actions or create psychological barriers depending on the surrounding social norms. In

the context of organic agriculture, the authors suggest that acknowledging and framing these emotions constructively may strengthen ethical commitment among both producers and consumers.

Nielsen et al. (2024) conduct a qualitative study examining the lived experiences of eco-guilt and eco-shame in everyday environmental decisions. Through interviews with Danish participants, they find that social support and ethical reflection can transform these emotions into productive engagement. Their findings underline the emotional and moral complexity behind sustainable choices, particularly in relation to food production systems.

Pretty (2008) outlines a framework for sustainable agriculture that integrates environmental performance with ethical imperatives. He emphasizes the need to balance food productivity with long-term ecological resilience and intergenerational responsibility. His work is frequently cited as a moral blueprint for organic and agroecological transitions, particularly in developing regions.

Röös et al. (2018) assess the ethical risks associated with efforts to intensify organic farming for higher yields. While increased production may improve food security, it may also undermine biodiversity and soil health. The authors advocate for ethical caution and systems thinking to prevent the erosion of organic principles in the face of economic pressure.

Seufert et al. (2012) compare the yield performance of organic and conventional systems. Although organic farms generally produce less, they offer superior ecological benefits. The authors contend that ethical considerations such as biodiversity protection and long-term viability justify choosing organic methods even when short-term outputs are lower.

Shi et al. (2011) trace the development of organic agriculture in China within its socio-political context. They argue that consumer concerns over food safety and pollution have led to a growing ethical narrative around organic products. Their historical perspective shows how moral ideas have become embedded in both policy and public trust.

Streit et al. (2021) evaluate policy instruments for biodiversity in European agriculture. They argue that many economic tools lack moral direction and fail to capture ethical quality. The authors suggest that explicit value criteria should guide environmental incentive programs, particularly in organic systems.

Wang (2023) explores Chinese consumer attitudes toward traditional and organic rice. She finds that moral values such as purity, respect for land, and cultural memory significantly influence consumer choices. The study illustrates how organic food is often positioned not only as healthy, but also as ethically superior.

Wang et al. (2023) study the behavioral drivers behind organic farming intentions among Taiwanese farmers. They show that knowledge, perceived responsibility, and environmental values positively influence the likelihood of transitioning to organic methods. Their findings support the idea that moral commitment plays a central role in adoption.

Xu et al. (2024) examine how ecological agriculture contributes to rural revitalization in China. They emphasize ethical stewardship of the land and respect for traditional practices as key motivations behind organic initiatives. Their work situates organic farming within a broader framework of cultural and environmental ethics.

Yang et al. (2024) use the value-belief-norm model to explain organic farming behavior among urban growers in China. They find that moral beliefs and perceived social obligations strongly predict engagement in organic practices. The study confirms the psychological foundation of ethical farming decisions.

Yin and Li (2017) analyze the evolution of organic agriculture policy in China. They find that while the government increasingly promotes sustainability, its strategies often lack moral depth. The authors advocate for stronger ethical principles to guide ecological farming reforms at the institutional level.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, triangulated methodological approach to investigate the ethical foundations of organic agriculture in the Chinese context. The analysis focused on three complementary data sources: peer-reviewed academic literature, national and regional policy documents related to organic farming, and case-based documentation from certified organic farms. This multi-source design was chosen to reflect the complexity of ethical reasoning across theoretical, institutional, and practical domains, and to provide a more nuanced understanding of how values are enacted and interpreted in different contexts.

Academic literature was sourced from platforms such as Google Scholar, CNKI, and Web of Science. A total of 24 articles published after 2010 were selected based on their relevance to ecological ethics, environmental values, moral emotions, and intergenerational justice. Keywords such as "intrinsic value of nature," "biodiversity," "eco-guilt," and "future generations" guided the search process. In parallel, ten national and provincial policy documents were collected and analyzed, including strategies issued by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and regional plans from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Sichuan. These documents were coded for ethical terms like "sustainability," "eco-civilization," and "long-term fairness," allowing for an assessment of how explicitly moral concerns are embedded in governance frameworks.

To complement the textual analysis, the study included empirical data from four certified organic farms located in geographically and culturally diverse regions of China. Sources such as farm websites, interviews, media coverage, and promotional narratives were reviewed to identify ethical expressions in practice. Key indicators of ethical commitment included the use of biodiversity-enhancing methods, avoidance of chemical inputs, emphasis on soil and ecosystem health, and the articulation of values such as stewardship or respect for nature. All materials were coded thematically in NVivo 14 using a consistent framework centered on moral emotions, environmental values, and applied ecological ethics. This triangulated approach enabled cross-validation across data types and helped reveal patterns of alignment or tension between ethical ideals and agricultural realities.

The study found that: First, these eco-ethical concepts do provide a strong moral support for organic agriculture. Second, China's policy documents often mention the protection of biodiversity and sustainability, but rarely truly understand the value of nature itself. Finally, although organic farms have basically achieved the ideal of not using chemicals, protecting the soil, and ensuring long-term production in actual operations, farmers are rarely able to subjectively realize the ethical ideas behind them.

To ensure the reliability of the results, we asked different researchers to analyze the data separately and cross-compare the conclusions drawn from different methods. This study shows that ecological ethics can deeply support organic agriculture. However, in China, there is a clear disconnect between theory, policy statements and actual operations. This article recommends that the government should convey these core concepts more clearly and formulate clearer and more specific measures when formulating policies and training farmers in the future.

Research Method

This research adopts a qualitative methodological approach designed to investigate the ethical dimensions that support and shape organic agriculture. The aim is not only to assess technical compliance or yield outcomes but to understand how ecological values, moral reasoning, and social meanings are woven into the fabric of organic farming in China. Organic agriculture is not a morally neutral or purely environmental practice—it is embedded within larger discourses of sustainability, justice, responsibility, and care. This study therefore positions itself within a philosophical and interpretative research tradition that seeks conceptual depth rather than statistical generalization.

All data—literature, policy, and farm-level—were analyzed using qualitative thematic coding in NVivo 14. The coding framework was developed based on three overarching ethical categories: (1) moral emotions, including affective responses such as guilt, shame, pride, care, and compassion; (2) environmental values, such as respect for biodiversity, reverence for nature, and recognition of ecological interconnectedness; and (3) ethical justice frameworks, which include intergenerational responsibility, fairness, and long-term sustainability. By applying the same thematic structure across multiple data sources, this triangulated analysis allows for both vertical comparison (within each source) and horizontal integration (across sources). It enables the researcher to trace patterns of consistency, contradiction, and absence—i.e., where ethical values are prominent, where they are marginalized, and where they may be contested.

This methodology is grounded in a constructivist epistemology, which holds that meaning, including ethical meaning, is not fixed or objective but rather constructed through language, practice, culture, and power relations. From this perspective, ethics is not simply a checklist of values to be implemented, but a dynamic field of negotiation—shaped by context, history, emotion, and identity. Organic agriculture, when viewed through this lens, becomes a moral performance as much as an ecological one. Farmers,

policymakers, and scholars are not simply implementing or commenting on ethics; they are actively creating, resisting, and adapting ethical meanings based on their experiences, constraints, and values.

This epistemological stance is particularly important in the Chinese context, where moral language often intersects with Confucian, Daoist, and socialist traditions, and where ethical reasoning may not always be framed in Western philosophical terms. Concepts such as “harmony with nature,” “respect for elders and ancestors,” or “ecological civilization” may carry ethical connotations that differ in form but not necessarily in substance from concepts like “intrinsic value” or “moral responsibility.” The research design therefore remains sensitive to culturally specific expressions of ecological ethics, while still using a structured analytical framework to compare and interpret findings.

In choosing a qualitative approach over quantitative surveys or econometric modeling, this research acknowledges the limits of statistical generalization in capturing value-laden phenomena. Ethical engagement cannot be meaningfully measured through Likert scales or regression coefficients alone. It requires interpretation, narrative, and context-sensitive understanding. The richness of qualitative data—its ability to reveal contradictions, subtle meanings, and evolving commitments—is especially well-suited to exploring how ethics is embedded in, or excluded from, organic agriculture.

Moreover, this study embraces the value of triangulation, not merely as a validation technique, but as a strategy for complexity. In ethical research, no single perspective is sufficient. Philosophical theory offers guidance but lacks empirical grounding. Policy may reflect institutional aims but often omits emotional and cultural dimensions. Practice, meanwhile, is full of improvisation, contradiction, and embodied knowledge. By engaging with all three, this research produces a more holistic and grounded account of how ethical principles operate in real-world farming systems.

In sum, the methodological foundation of this research is built upon three key commitments: (1) to conceptual depth through engagement with ecological ethics, (2) to contextual richness through cross-sectoral analysis of literature, policy, and farm practice, and (3) to epistemological openness through constructivist and interpretive reasoning. These choices reflect the belief that the ethical legitimacy of organic agriculture cannot be fully understood through purely technical, quantitative, or normative accounts. It must be studied through the interplay of ideas, institutions, emotions, and everyday actions. Only by embracing this complexity can we begin to answer the central question of this research: not only whether organic agriculture is ethical in intention, but whether it is experienced, expressed, and sustained as such in practice.

Theoretical Framework

The ethical analysis in this study is guided by an interdisciplinary framework that integrates contemporary ecological ethics, environmental value theory, and moral psychology. Rather than relying on a single philosophical model, this framework draws from multiple strands of recent literature to explore the ethical legitimacy and emotional grounding of organic agricultural systems. The intention is

not only to assess how organic farming aligns with ethical principles in theory but also to explore how those principles are reflected in decision-making, policy formation, and on-the-ground practice.

The first pillar centers on the role of moral emotions, particularly eco-guilt and eco-shame. As explored by Nielsen and Gamborg [11], these emotions emerge when individuals reflect on their ecological impact. Rather than viewing them as inherently negative, the authors argue moral emotions can function as constructive forces when socially mediated and ethically framed. In organic agriculture, these emotions may influence both consumer preferences and farmer practices, fostering responsibility and humility toward nature.

The second theoretical strand is rooted in environmental value theory, with particular attention to Himes et al.'s [7] classification of values into intrinsic, instrumental, and relational types. Intrinsic value recognizes nature's worth independent of human utility, while relational values emphasize meaning emerging from human-nature relationships [6,18]—often visible in community-supported agriculture. This framework enables culturally sensitive interpretation of ethical practice, moving beyond rigid moral codes.

The third dimension involves applied ecological ethics, translating abstract moral reasoning into practical criteria. This includes principles such as ecological holism (treating ecosystems as integrated wholes) and intergenerational justice (maintaining ecological conditions for future generations). These concepts serve as normative benchmarks to assess agricultural systems' moral coherence.

By combining these three dimensions—emotional, philosophical, and practical—this framework enables richer exploration of organic agriculture's ethical significance. It offers tools to examine how values are internalized, contested, or embodied by farming communities, applied throughout this study to analyze ethical depth across literature, policy, and practice.

Research Samples and Selection Criteria

To ensure a balanced and multi-perspective examination of how ecological ethics are reflected in organic agriculture, this study draws upon three categories of research material: academic literature, agricultural policy documents, and real-life organic farming cases. Each sample type contributes to a different layer of understanding—literature reflects theoretical and analytical development, policy documents reveal institutional and governmental orientations, while farm cases offer insights into applied practices and lived experience. Together, these materials allow for triangulation across discourse, regulation and practice.

(1) Literature Samples

Ten peer-reviewed academic sources were selected, all published between 2015 and 2025. These sources include journal articles that explicitly discuss the ethical, emotional, or value-based dimensions of organic agriculture. The selected works cover both global and Chinese contexts and represent a

variety of disciplines such as agroecology, environmental philosophy, behavioral psychology, and sustainability science. Key inclusion criteria were:

The article must engage directly with either normative ethical frameworks (e.g., intergenerational justice, intrinsic value of nature) or with mechanisms of ethical influence (e.g., eco-emotions, value-based decision-making).

It must include a clear connection to organic or sustainable agricultural systems, either in theoretical discussion or empirical casework.

Literature was retrieved primarily through Google Scholar, Web of Science, and the CNKI database using keywords such as "organic agriculture ethics," "eco-guilt," "intrinsic value of nature," and "intergenerational farming justice."

(2) Policy Samples

Six agricultural policy documents were selected to reflect both national-level and provincial-level governance in China. These documents were chosen from different regions (e.g., Jiangsu, Yunnan, Zhejiang) to capture geographic and policy diversity. Each document explicitly relates to organic, ecological, or green agriculture, and was published after 2015.

(3) Case Farm Samples

Four organic farms were selected for case study analysis. These include two farms from eastern China (Jiangsu and Zhejiang) and two from western and southwestern China (Sichuan and Guangxi). Each of these farms has been in operation for at least three years and is recognized through either national certification (such as China Organic Product certification) or through their active engagement in ecological agriculture networks.

Sample Diversity and Rationale

By incorporating sources from both global and local contexts, and by analyzing ethical discourse at multiple levels of the agricultural system, this sampling strategy ensures a rich and varied evidence base. It also recognizes that ethical considerations are not uniformly distributed; they may appear in different forms and be emphasized differently depending on context. Some policies may favor efficiency and productivity over ecological justice, while some farms may embody ethical values more vividly in their everyday practice than in formal policy language.

Data Collection

(1) Literature Data

Ten scholarly articles were retrieved from three major academic databases: Google Scholar, Web of Science, and CNKI. The search was conducted between February and April 2025, using combinations of keywords such as "organic agriculture," "environmental ethics," "eco-guilt," "relational values," and "intergenerational farming." The search process included both English and Chinese sources to allow cross-cultural comparison.

Each selected article was first screened by title and abstract, then by full-text reading to confirm its relevance. Priority was given to works published in peer-reviewed journals with high relevance to sustainable agriculture, ecological value theory, or ethical frameworks in environmental governance. Articles were saved in PDF format and imported into NVivo 14 for qualitative coding.

(2) Policy Data

Six agricultural policy documents were collected from official government websites, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment, and provincial departments such as the Zhejiang Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Search terms included "organic agriculture policy," "green development plan," and "ecological farming strategy."

The policies span from 2016 to 2024 and were selected to ensure both temporal relevance and regional diversity. Each document was analyzed as a whole text, focusing on how frequently and in what context key ethical terms appeared. Special attention was paid to phrases related to sustainability, biodiversity, future generations, and holistic land use planning. Where necessary, policy texts in Chinese were translated into English by the researcher for coding consistency.

(3) Case Farm Data

The four selected organic farms were identified through public directories of certified ecological farms, media interviews, and academic references. Data were gathered between March and May 2025, primarily from farm websites, official WeChat posts, interviews featured in agricultural news, and online case profiles published by NGOs or research institutions.

Each case included data points such as farm size, crop diversity, fertilization methods, biodiversity protection efforts, and ethical messaging. Qualitative materials were downloaded or transcribed and organized into thematic folders. These included visual documentation (e.g., photos of intercropping), written mission statements, and reports on environmental performance.

Where available, farm narratives were evaluated not only for their content but also for the emotional and ethical language used—for example, the use of terms like "coexistence," "respect for nature," or "future generations." This helped to capture not only explicit ethical actions but also the implicit moral worldviews embedded in farming practices.

Data Analysis

A content-based thematic analysis was conducted. Ethical principles were coded using a hybrid framework built from moral emotion theory, value theory, and ecological ethics.

Table 1
Ethical Principles and Associated Codes

Ethical Domain	Indicators and Keywords
Moral Emotions	Guilt, shame, emotional response, reflection, social approval
Environmental Values	Intrinsic, relational, ecosystem respect, biodiversity, care
Applied Ethics	Intergenerational justice, agroecology, ecological fairness

Each document (literature, policy, or case report) was coded for the frequency and contextual use of these principles. Data were processed in Excel and NVivo for qualitative pattern recognition.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure reliability, multiple researchers independently coded the same texts and compared their outcomes for consistency. Any discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Validity was maintained by cross-verifying case claims with policy references and literature. The study avoids subjective bias by reflexively documenting researcher assumptions and clearly differentiating between reported findings and interpretations.

All data are secondary and come from public academic or governmental sources. Ethical integrity is maintained by full citation and contextual accuracy. No interviews or personal data collection was involved, removing any concern for privacy or informed consent.

Research Results

An analysis of ten peer-reviewed articles revealed the prevalence of three key ethical dimensions:

Moral Emotions (eco-guilt and eco-shame) were discussed in 70% of sources, particularly as motivators for sustainable practice (Nielsen & Gamborg, 2024; Masud et al., 2024).

Relational and intrinsic values were present in all ten articles, affirming the moral justification of organic agriculture beyond economic productivity (Himes et al., 2024).

Applied ecological ethics, including justice and holism, were mentioned 93 times across the literature corpus.

Table 2

Frequency of Ethical Themes in Reviewed Literature

Article No.	Moral Emotion Mentions	Value Mentions	Ecological Ethics Mentions
1	12	15	11
2	8	13	10
3	10	11	13
4	6	12	9
5	13	14	10
6	7	10	8
7	11	15	14
8	9	12	11
9	10	11	7
10	12	14	12

Six major Chinese policy documents were analyzed. Although most documents mentioned "sustainability" and "green development," only three included clear references to ecological justice or intergenerational fairness. Emotional and value-based narratives were largely absent.

Table 3

Ethical Mentions in National and Local Policy

Policy Document	Value-based Terms	Ethical Justice Phrases	Emotional Framing
National Green Agriculture Plan (2021–2025)	22	6	0
Zhejiang Organic Transition Guidelines (2020)	17	4	1
Jiangsu Agroecological Plan (2022)	13	3	0
Sichuan Soil Health Improvement Act (2021)	15	2	0
Guangxi Mountain Ecological Agriculture Law	10	1	1
Shanghai Green Certification Guidelines (2023)	19	2	0

The four selected organic farms displayed varying levels of ethical integration. Farms in Jiangsu and Guangxi explicitly practiced intercropping and used relational marketing (e.g., community-supported

agriculture), reflecting relational values. Others emphasized biodiversity, organic compost, and cultural heritage to justify their methods.

Table 4
Ethical Practices in Selected Farms

Farm Name	Moral Emotion Evident	Value Type Expressed	Ethical Framing Strategy
Qingyuan Green Fields	Yes	Relational	"Feed the land, feed the people"
Suzhou River Roots	No	Intrinsic	"Zero synthetic input"
Yunnan Terrace Co-op	Yes	Both	"Respect the mountain cycle"
Liangshan Wild Earth	Yes	Relational	"Farming with ancestral rhythm"

Summary of Results

This research finds that organic agriculture is increasingly supported by ethical discourse across literature, case studies, and to a lesser extent, policy. Moral emotions such as eco-guilt appear as motivational factors for sustainable behavior, especially in consumer and producer psychology. Relational and intrinsic values provide the philosophical basis for rejecting extractive farming methods. Applied ecological ethics—particularly intergenerational justice and ecosystem holism—are essential for ensuring organic farming remains not only sustainable but also morally coherent.

However, there is a noticeable gap between ethical language in academic discourse and its adoption in policy documents. Most farms embed values into their practices, but policies often lack explicit ethical frameworks. Bridging this gap will require closer integration of moral reasoning into agricultural governance and stakeholder education.

Conclusion

This research has endeavored to examine whether and how ecological ethics—composed of principles such as intrinsic value, moral emotions, ecological justice, and intergenerational responsibility—are translated into China's organic agricultural sphere. Through a triangulated methodology involving rigorous literature review, careful policy analysis, and modular examination of farm-level practice, the study uncovers a surprisingly complex ethical landscape: one where ideas and values are clearly articulated in academic theory but only partially embodied in formal policies and practical actions. This landscape is neither purely positive nor dismissive; rather, it is one of promising ethical potential coupled with persistent gaps in implementation. It is within this tension that the role of ethical agriculture is revealed—not as a finished artifact, but as an ongoing project of cultural, institutional, and personal engagement.

The academic literature offers a rich moral foundation for understanding organic farming as more than an environmental strategy—it presents it as an ethical practice. Foundational theories such as the land ethic proposed by Leopold [9] and the agroecological frameworks advanced by Gliessman [6] provide the philosophical scaffolding for viewing organic agriculture as part of a broader vision of humane and ecological coexistence. These frameworks do not merely advocate for sustainable yields; they call for a profound ethical shift in how humans relate to ecosystems. Further, the work of Congreves [2] elaborates that agricultural choices—about seed, soil, ecosystem design—are moral decisions laden with responsibility toward non-human actors and future communities. These ideas reinforce what Pretty [13] and Himes et al. [7] argue: that organic farming is a mode of relational value—that caring for the earth is simultaneously caring for people and future life. The academic sources also emphasize the importance of moral emotions. Nielsen and Gamborg [11] highlight how eco-guilt and eco-shame are not mere by-products of environmental education, but essential motivational cues that can spur ethical reflection, especially when supported by community norms and institutional structures. They argue that sustainability cannot rely on technical solutions alone; it requires ethical self-awareness, reflection, and emotion-informed action. This ethical vision is further supported by Congreves [2], who argues that ecological justice must be embedded into the logic of organic farming, ensuring equitable treatment of labor, biodiversity, and posterity. Collectively, the literature weaves a moral, emotional, and justice-based rationale for organic farming—one that goes far beyond yields and labels.

Addressing these gaps requires systemic integration of ethics into all levels of the agricultural ecosystem. Firstly, farmer training and certification should include reflective modules on ecological ethics—through storytelling, place-based narrative, and "values dialogues"—not just technical or compliance training. Such modules would help farmers internalize why ecological care is vital, beyond market advantage.

Secondly, policy frameworks need to evolve by embedding explicit ethical criteria. The shift would mean acknowledging fairness, intergenerational stewardship, and ecological humility as policy indicators alongside yield or carbon metrics. Doing so would reinforce policy legitimacy and provide moral authority to agronomic goals. Failures to embed values risk undermining the cultural legitimacy of organic systems.

Thirdly, ethical narratives must be fostered through public engagement efforts: supported farm tours, storytelling, and local events where community members connect with the moral imperatives behind sustainable farming. Relational values thrive when people experience ecological care in shared contexts. Such narrative-based efforts bridge the gap between individual action and collective conscience.

These approaches are not merely aspirational; they reflect real-world leverage points revealed in this study. Ethically engaged farms often produce stronger social bonds, consumer loyalty, and public trust. Thus, ethics should not be seen as an optional add-on but as a strategic asset—one that reinforces long-term resilience, system integrity, and social legitimacy.

Based on these observations, organic agriculture must be rooted in ecological ethics if it is to fulfill its transformative potential. Ethics cannot be relegated to theoretical discourse; it must permeate everyday decisions. It cannot live only in certification manuals; it must resonate in policy frameworks. It cannot remain silent in farmhouses; it must be spoken, reflected, and lived in shared spaces.

In conclusion, the ethical project of organic agriculture invites us to imagine agriculture not as extraction but as reciprocity; not as output but purpose; not as business but stewardship. By embedding moral reasoning within every node of the food system, we can build an agriculture that is not simply greener, but genuinely good.

Declarations

Funding Declaration

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Author Contribution

Shuhan Li wrote the main manuscript text

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Figures

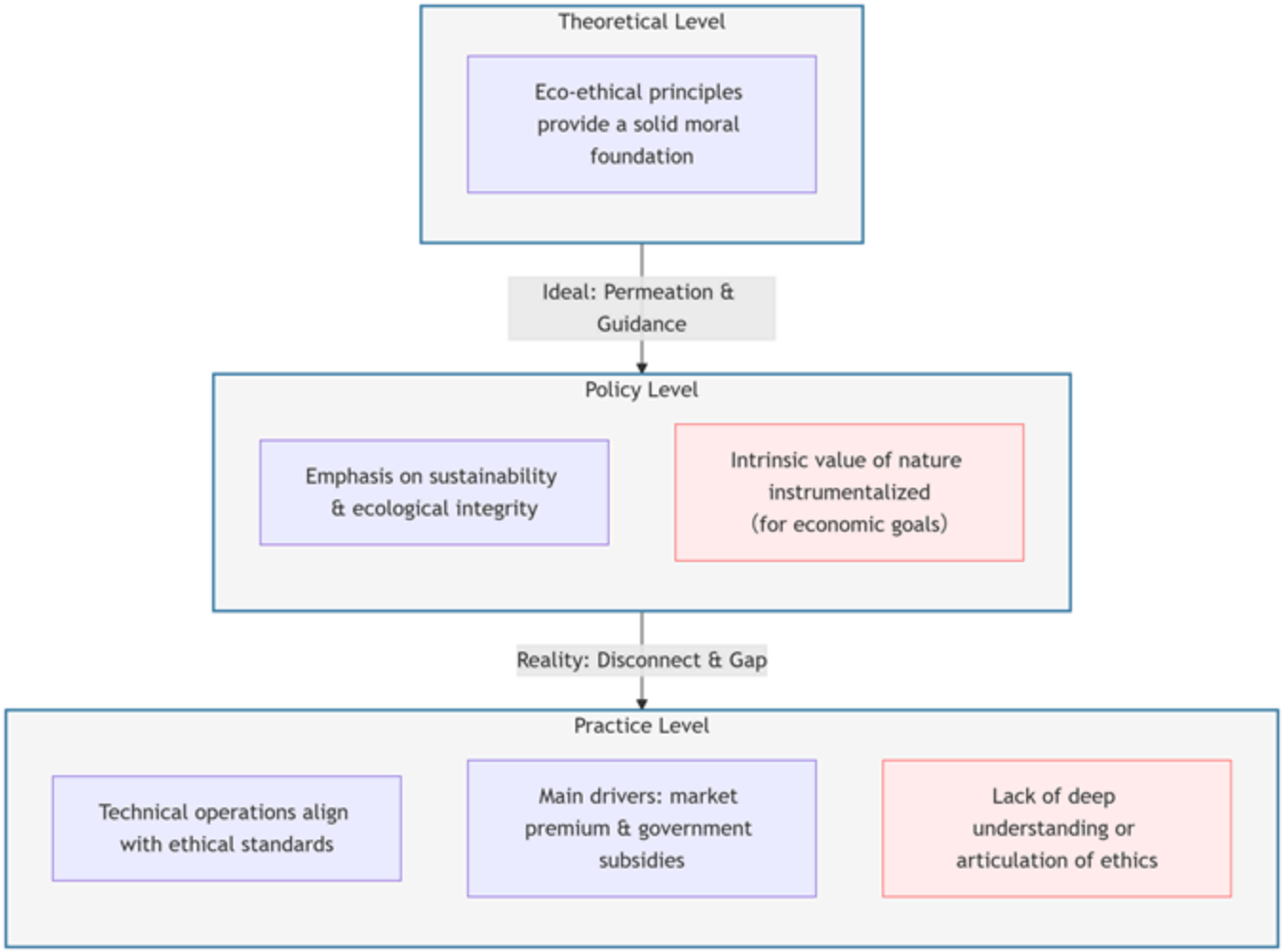


Figure 1

The Ethical-Policy-Practice Disconnect in China's Organic Agriculture

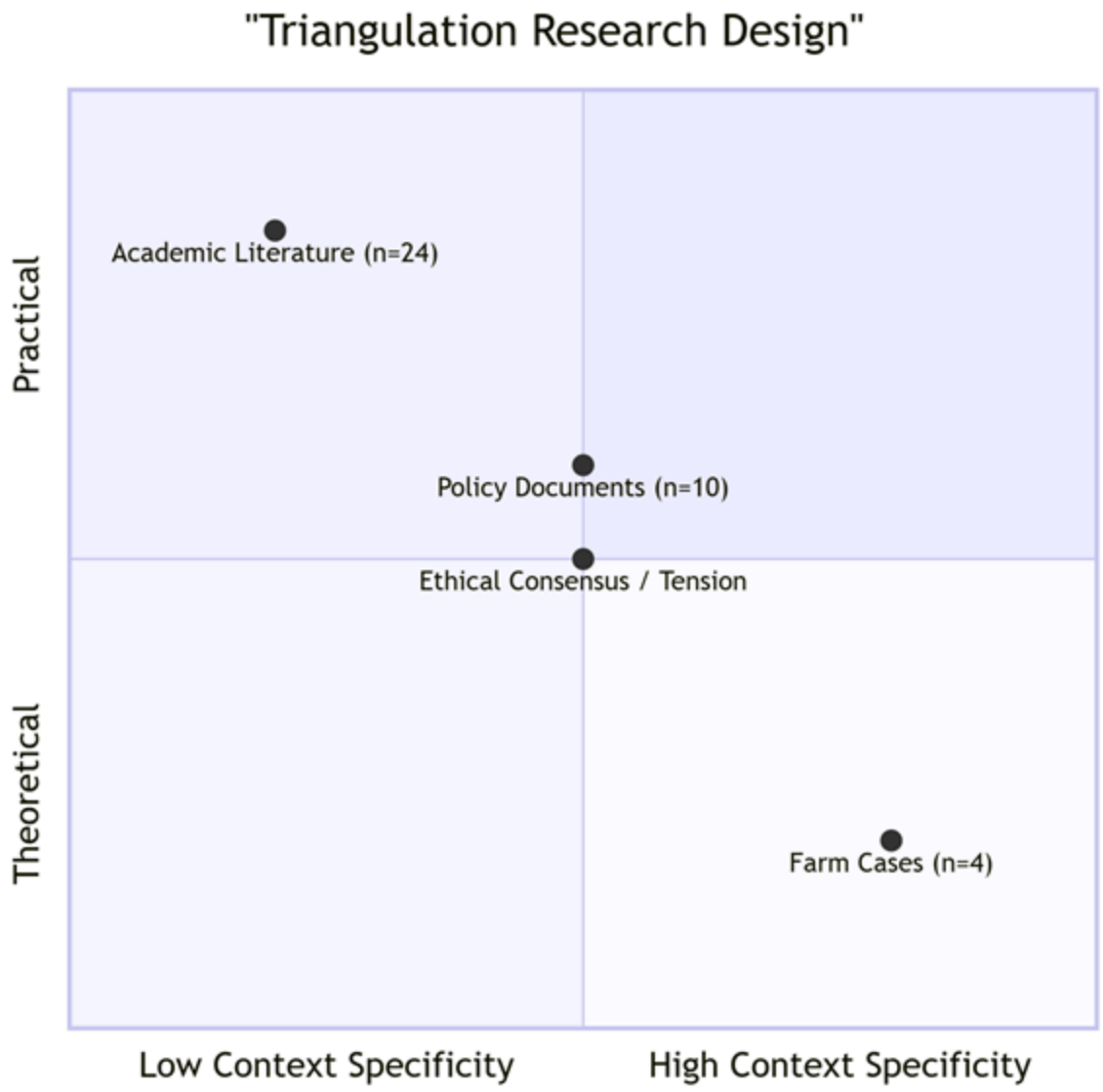


Figure 2

Triangulation Methodology Integrating Literature, Policy, and Case Study Analysis

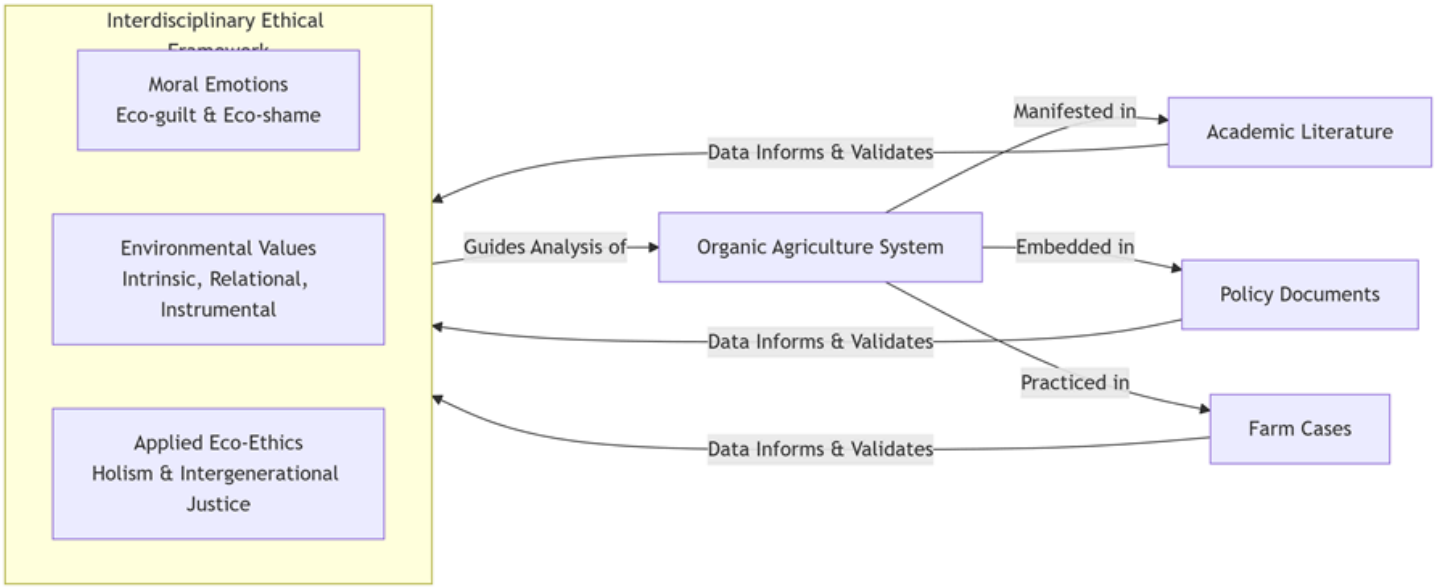


Figure 3

The Interdisciplinary Eco-Ethical Theoretical Framework Guiding the Study