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A Chinese route to sustainability: post-socialist transitions and the construction of ecological civilisation

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of sustainability in a post-socialist context through an analysis of official discourses relating to sustainability in more than 700 articles published in the Chinese-language newspaper *People's Daily* during 2015. The Chinese conception of sustainability that emerges is a top-down model built upon traditional ideologies and Chinese socialist legacies, encompassing economic growth, environmental sustainability, social justice and quality of life. This Chinese official discourse of sustainability places less emphasis on individuals' rights and more on the state's interests, and is wrapped up in the Chinese concept of the 'ecological civilisation'. The article demonstrates the value of adopting a more international approach to thinking about the idea of sustainability that focuses on the sustainability-related discourses constructed within different national contexts using local languages and rhetoric.

Keywords sustainability; post-socialist transitions; ecological civilisation; intergenerationality; discourse analysis; China

Introduction

It is broadly agreed that sustainability consists of three dimensions of economic, social and environmental development since the release of Brundtland Report (1987). There is no single definition of sustainability because different societies tend to interpret this notion in a way that suits their particular goals and interests (Sneddon, 2000). In this sense, the concept of, and framework for sustainability needs to be understood through the lens of local contexts and practices (Brown et al., 1987; Lele, 1991; Sneddon, 2000; Voinov, 2008; Lawhon & Murphy, 2011) as well as by scaling up

beyond the local (Lawhon & Murphy, 2011). However, the majority of existing work on the definition of sustainability (e.g. Lawhon & Murphy, 2011; Sneddon, 2000; Jochen et al., 2012; Christen, 2012) and its application to sustainable practices (Potter & Tilzey, 2007; Kythreotis & Jonas, 2012;) is overwhelmingly constructed through a Western lens in a neoliberal and postcolonial context. How other national contexts contribute to the idea of sustainability and how they carry out sustainable development strategies is generally missing from this literature. This paper expands the discussion by focusing on how the concepts of ‘sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ are currently constructed within Chinese official discourse.

In this study, we identify a Chinese official understanding of sustainability, drawing on a discourse analysis of more than 700 articles published in *People’s Daily* – a nationwide Chinese newspaper published by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Nowadays, *People’s Daily* publishes domestic and international news, editorials on national policies and strategies and the full texts of president’s decrees, government work reports and other governmental documents on behalf of the central government. As a consequence, the discourses evident in the *People’s Daily* primarily represent national policies and dominant political ideologies. Thus, rather than multiple meanings of sustainability constructed based on diverse actors’ political interests in the West (e.g. Schultz et al., 2008; Christen, 2012; Morse, 2013; Fisher et al., 2017), the discursive construction of sustainability explored in this article represents a government-led effort to propagandise the notion of sustainability in the public sphere in China.

In the remainder of this article, we first explain the social and political context in which this discourse takes place by looking at sustainable development policies after the post-socialist transition. Following this, the empirical sections will elucidate how Chinese authorities use ‘ecological civilisation’ to understand sustainability; how the Chinese Government promotes social justice and quality of life through the discourses of livelihood (*minsheng*) and quality (*suzhi*); and thirdly, how the phrase ‘benefiting future generations (*zaofu zisun houdai*)’ represents the political understanding of intergenerationality. We also consider the interrelationship of *minsheng*, *suzhi* and *zaofu zisun houdai* under the umbrella concept of ‘ecological civilisation’.

Government-led views on sustainability in post-socialist China

After the East-West dichotomy of the Cold War era, many socialist countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Africa and Cuba have experienced economic, political and social transformations aimed at strengthening ownership of private property. Such transformation is understood as ‘post-socialist transition’ by scholars. China is a very particular case of post-socialist transition which on the one hand seeks to boost the domestic economy through the introduction of marketisation, and on the other hand to adhere to the socialist values and doctrines left by Mao Zedong (Herrschel, 2007). China’s transition dates back to the enactment of the 1978 ‘open and reform policy’ (the Reform), which aimed at establishing strategies of domestic economic reform and opening up China internationally through introducing capital markets into the socialist economic system.

In this transitional context, some scholars (e.g. Farquhar, 2002; Herrschel, 2007; Nonini, 2008; Keith et al., 2014) hold that neoliberalism, which is a dominant and hegemonic ideology in the West, is not a privileged discourse in China. For such scholars, the CCP underpins the Reform in an attempt to balance the communist past and capitalist present through a careful introduction of marketization

while maintaining the autocratic one-party state, Maoist communist values and its political morals. These scholars claim that Maoist regime values persist in a ‘total control of state and society and thus the repression of civil society and any political debate other than reciting officially sanctioned statements’ (Herrschel, 2007, p. 143). This is an ideology which holds that the State is prior to the individual and is embedded in current Chinese political doctrine and social norms. From a more everyday perspective, although indulgence of personal tastes is accepted in the economic and social life of Chinese people, the moralistic rhetoric inherent in the value of collective service is still prevalent in Chinese discourse (Farquhar, 2002). That is, the post-socialist transition of China seeks a separation of economic reform from political transformation – a form of full marketization under an authoritarian regime through a soft (gradual, experimental and localised) process which has challenged the classic view of the nature and progress of neoliberalisation and democratisation widely held in the West (Herrschel, 2007).

The social and environmental consequences brought about by this post-socialist transition foreground the Chinese interpretation of sustainability. Because of the gradual and experimental nature of post-socialist transition in China in the past three decades, which has liberated and globalised the country’s capitalist market, placed economic development as the central task of the nation and allowed some areas to get rich first through hierarchal and top-down governance (Keith et al., 2014), China experienced a period of high economic growth. However, such economic development has brought about a series of social problems including social and regional inequality, resource waste and ecological destruction, which became a key reason for China’s gradual embrace of sustainability in its national policies in the post-Reform period (see, for example, Guo et al., 2018).

In 1995, the concept of ‘sustainable development’ was first proposed in the Fifth Plenary Session of the Fourteenth Central Committee of CCP to describe the proper relationship between economic development, population growth, natural resource exploitation and environmental protection¹. At this time, sustainable development refers to a national strategy which aims at sustaining economic development through top-down population control, resource conservation and environmental protection and taking future generations into consideration, reflecting the globally acknowledged Brundtland-style sustainability. This top-down strategy of promoting sustainable development is not only a Chinese response to a global development trend, but also a political measure to sustain the socialist market.

In the recent decade, combining the endogenous Chinese cultures and the globally accepted three-dimensional has become a new way to define sustainability in China. Building a harmonious society was placed at the top of the social and political agenda in the CCP’s 17th National Congress in 2007. The national strategy of building a harmonious society is based on a blend of Confucian and Taoist ideologies about respecting the rule of nature and nature-human unity. It deems harmonious relations as a political power which can compel people to act in a more civilised way, combining Marxist-Leninist thoughts with Western management philosophy (Li et al., 2016). This strategy requires building a well-off society, creating a new socialist situation within China and building up a new order of the world through the notion of Confucius and Taoist ‘harmony’ which emphasises political unity, social stability and the integration of human society and nature. Moreover, individuals

¹ <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64567/65446/4441712.html>

and the officially sanctioned socialist market are identified as playing important roles in the government-led formulation of the discourses of ‘sustainability’.

Since the creation of this social and political ideology of a ‘harmonious society’, social harmony has become one of the key ideologies of post-socialist China. In 2012, the Chinese President Xi Jinping promoted a strategy of chasing the ‘Chinese dream’ through social and environmental harmony at the CCP’s 18th National Congress. According to this strategy, the key goal of the Chinese government is to promote economic transformation, cope with climate change, and maintain a global ecological balance. In 2015, the Five Development Concepts (one of the aims of the 13th Five-Year Plan²) clarified that the key objectives of sustainable development policy should include the maintenance of socio-economic well-being and social justice, as well as a harmonious relationship between human society and nature. Therefore, in the post-reform era, sustainability has gradually become a key policy issue through a top-down process which seeks to balance the quality of the environment, economic development, social justice and quality of life in China with a cultural foundation of Confucian and Taoist philosophies.

This Study

In this study, we examine the Chinese official discourse of sustainability through an analysis of *People’s Daily* in 2015 – the year the 13th Five Year Plan was introduced. Before the empirical analysis, it is necessary to clarify the research methods in this research. We identified a total of 705 articles about sustainability published by *People’s Daily* in 2015 including editorials, commentary, news reports and special features, using keyword searches for ‘sustainability/sustainable’ (*kechixu* in Chinese) of their online archive (<http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html>). The analysis process included two steps. Firstly, a series of key terms relating to the concept of sustainability and its impact on quality of life, social justice, the environment and intergenerational attitudes and expectations were identified. Secondly, these collected texts were then critically processed using the qualitative data analysis computer software Nvivo 10 and analysed for evidence of what they revealed about attitudes in Chinese official discourse, based on a rigorous coding process. The articles were read and reread to identify themes and concepts, according to the words originally used by *People’s Daily*. These words formed the Key codes used in the analysis. These initial codes were subdivided into subthemes and detailed concepts, to identify key sustainability frames. A frame is here understood as ‘a storyline or unfolding narrative about an issue’ and can include sub-frames, which can be aggregated and disaggregated into larger and smaller issue-frames (Manzo & Padfield, 2016).

Table 1 shows the key sustainability themes (codes) identified, the number of *People’s Daily* articles in the discourse corpus in which they appeared and the total number of references made to these articles in the corpus, together with example headlines of the coded articles.

Table 1 Key codes of sustainability in *People’s Daily*

² Five-Year Plans are a series of social and economic development initiatives and targets, which are proposed and approved through the plenary sessions of the Central Committee and national congresses every five years since 1953.

Key themes (codes)	No of articles	No of references	Example headlines
Economy	615	729	Accelerate development and open up, in order to set up a win-win model of international cooperation (加快开放开发 实现合作共赢), 20 May 2015 Rethinking sustainable development from a economic perspective (可持续发展经济学再思考), 28 June 2015
Social justice	180	287	Gender equality and women's life in China (中国性别平等与妇女发展), 23 September 2015
Livelihood/quality of life	211	492	Megacity needs to construct better pedestrian zones (大城市要利于步行), 14 July 2015 Only 20 per cent of nursing homes have provided both caring and medical services to older people (医养结合的养老院仅两成), 8 December 2015
Environment	101	120	Portray the beauty of ecology through the natural landscape (于山水之间书写生态之美), 9 July 2015 The construction of a "green Asia-Pacific area" has great potential ("绿色亚太" 建设彰显巨大潜力), 22 May 2015 China makes great contribution to coping with climate change (中国为应对气候变化做出很大的贡献), 11 December 2015
Future generations	56	67	For the sustainability of Chinese nation (为了中华民族的永续发展), 10 March 2015 Asia's future: our common destiny (亚洲新未来: 迈向命运共同体), 26 March 2015

'Ecological civilisation' (*Shengtai Wenming*): a Chinese interpretation of sustainable development

In the Western canon of literature on sustainability among the overlapping economic, environmental and social dimensions of this concept, the economy and environmental sustainability have especially strong linkages (Goodland, 1995). This phenomenon is also prominent in the studies of Chinese sustainability. China's sustainable development strategy encompasses four pillars: economic prosperity, quality of life, social justice and environmental protection (Guo et al., 2013). Although these four pillars are identified as being equally important, the growing body of studies on the Chinese approach to sustainability regards the relations between economic development and environmental protection to be at the centre of the Chinese sustainability framework (e.g. Liu, 2010; Guo et al., 2013; Li et al., 2016). The Chinese official understanding of sustainability is not confined to the combination of economic and environmental sustainability, however. Rather, it is also about the harmonious collaboration of economic, environmental and social sustainability represented by its special political and cultural discourses. In what follows, this section will elucidate the construction of the economy-environment-society relationship in Chinese official discourse through a discussion of a key term relating to Chinese sustainability which occurs frequently across all of the key themes

showed in Table 1 – ecological civilisation (*shengtai wenming* in Chinese). This term is mentioned 644 times across 140 articles.

The interpretation of ‘sustainability’ is highly politically driven. As Morse (2013) indicates, the term ‘sustainability’ is explained with a commercial bias in right-of-centre newspapers and with a social justice orientation in left-of-centre newspapers in Britain. Similarly in other studies conducted in Western contexts, the meanings of ‘sustainability’ as constructed by the media are multiple, reflecting various major political views and the newspaper readers who hold different political attitudes in the market (Diprose et al., 2017; Fisher et al., 2017). Rather than the multiple meanings of sustainability interpreted in the West, the official discourse of ‘sustainability’ represented in *People’s Daily* is defined and explained unilaterally by the central government led by the CCP. The term ‘ecological civilisation’ refers to establishing sustainable production and consumption patterns, in order to achieve the human-human, human-nature and nature-society harmony, emphasising the interdependence, mutual reinforcement and coexistence of human society and the natural environment (Zhang et al., 2011), which is different from Western-oriented ideas of sustainable development.

In the *People’s Daily* discourse, ecological civilisation is a concept based on traditional ideologies, such as the Taoist saying ‘man is an integral part of nature’ (01/12/2015), the Confucian idea of ‘generous men love mountains, wise men love water’, and the internationally widespread traditional idiom ‘don’t kill the chicken that lays the eggs’ (05/03/2015). These sayings reflect Chinese wisdom about living with nature harmoniously and conform to the UN’s 5P approach to sustainability: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. It is a concept which respects nature, pursues ecological justice and security and focuses on human-environment-society harmony, rather than seeing the environment as a form of capital as it is understood within western capitalist ideology (28/06/2015). In addition, for the official discourse, Chinese ecological civilisation is a way to solve the problems brought about by the western approach of industrial civilisation:

The fundamental value of industrial civilisation is utilitarianism, efficiency, competition and Darwinian natural selection, while Chinese ecological civilisation [is] based on traditional views on harmony between humans and nature and concerns ecological justice and harmony among humans, society and nature. Industrial civilisation chases profits, capital accumulation and GDP, while ecological civilisation concerns the harmony between human and nature, environmental sustainability and social prosperity. Industrial civilisation depends on fossil energy, while ecological civilisation calls for using sustainable energy. The production chain under industrial civilisation is ‘raw material-production-products-waste’, while ecological civilisation tends to apply a circular economic model. Luxury and immoderate consumption are created by industrial civilisation, while low-carbon and moderate consumption is brought by ecological civilisation (25/08/2015).

As this quote suggests, rather than western ecological economics which tends to ‘overplay the “economic” in relation to the “ecological” (Sneddon, 2000, p. 528), the Chinese concept of ecological civilisation places people’s well-being at its centre, indicating that environmental and ecological resources should be distributed to everyone fairly (10/03/2015). Based on these differences, Chinese ecological civilisation is argued by *People’s Daily* to be a more sustainable approach to development than the western model of industrial civilisation. Endogenous ideas of the relationship between

humans and nature do not simply create a Chinese understanding of the relationship between human society and the natural environment, but also contribute to the universal values of sustainable development through a Chinese culture.

The construction of ecological civilisation is intertwined with the state-sanctioned market, as well. The socialist market under the government's surveillance can trigger ecological civilisation in two major ways (11/03/2015). Firstly, the discourse suggests, an ecological assessment of goods and services should be applied to the Chinese market. Through this assessment, only those complying with national ecological standards could be approved to enter the market. The second way is to establish a clean energy system through foreign investment which could guarantee sustainable energy consumption in China based on market competition. However, unlike western neoliberal governments which apply a democratic form of governance which distinguishes the interests of powerful voters from local industries, the Chinese government is based on an authoritarian regime which is nimble and capable of rapidly implementing massive programs in every aspect of society (Eaton & Kostka, 2014; Liu, 2000). Thus, this market derived ecological civilisation is completely planned and controlled by the Government. The discourse also suggests that the construction of ecological civilisation can stimulate economic growth and activate the market. An example of this is given in an article by President Xi Jinping who states 'green hills and clean water can become silver and gold mines' speech (25/08/2015). In essence, China is currently at the stage of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. There is a growing need for fresh air, clean water, a high-quality environment and other ecological products. In the future, more and more people would prefer a better environment. This trend provides a new economic development opportunity for those places with better ecological conditions (11/03/2015) – particularly the current less-industrialised and less developed places. In this way, ecological civilisation can help to balance the regional inequality in eco-economic development. In order to maintain a green lifestyle, the government should not simply work to increase GDP without regard to the ecological environment and future generations' benefit (02/12/2015) but should transform the polluting industries into more eco-friendly ones (31/03/2015).

Additionally, the construction of ecological civilisation is interpreted to be a necessary condition of the maintenance of the CCP's authority. According to *People's Daily*, the development of ecological civilisation can only be guaranteed by the CCP's leadership because it has created an advanced Scientific Outlook of Development which insists on the improvement of people's quality of life (05/12/2015). Although such a regime stresses an autocratic way of policy-making, it allows a democratic approach to policy implementation. According to an article on the CCP's role in the construction of an ecological civilisation, in order to reinforce the efficiency of ecological civilisation policy, an open and public participatory process, which allows public supervision of the implementation, is needed (19/08/2015).

In summary, the Chinese concept of 'ecological civilisation' is closely connected to a harmonious relationship between human society and the environment in a way which has economic, environmental and social outcomes, concerns a green style of industrial production and is beneficial to both present and future generations. This discourse was created by the authority through a strong network among the economic, environmental and social dimensions of sustainability based on the traditional idea of 'harmony', in order to underpin its regime. For affirming the benefit of adding Chineseness in the notion of sustainability, this Chinese discourse of sustainability is declared to be more advanced compared to the sustainable development concepts created in the West. However,

the implementation of ecological civilisation reflects both a combination of autocracy with limited grassroots participation.

The next two sections will further discuss how the Chinese interpretation of sustainability are constructed through Chinese rhetoric, drawing on a discussion of the use of two commonly-used Chinese words in this context – *minsheng* and *suzhi* – and the phrase ‘benefiting future generations’.

Livelihood (*Minsheng*) and *Suzhi*: social justice and the promotion of quality of life

The social dimension, which includes social justice and livelihood/quality of life, is vital in the Chinese interpretation of sustainability. As *People’s Daily* is highly political and represents government-led ways to achieve sustainability, social conflicts are seldom mentioned in its discourses of the social dimension of sustainable development. Social justice (287 references across 180 articles) is explained by *People’s Daily* as being justice among different social groups, that between different individuals within the same social group, and that between current and future generations (28/06/2015). This notion of social justice, which encompasses poverty reduction, shrinking the income gap and the promotion of regional and rural-urban equality in public services, aims at achieving a *Xiaokang* society (a term which can be translated as ‘small prosperity’, and which originated from a Confucian imagination of the ideal society in which people live and work happily with a sufficient supply of goods to meet basic needs, 24/12/2015). In particular, such social justice calls for an avoidance of contemporary unsustainable forms of development which value efficiency without equity, pay too much attention to urban development while ignoring the rural, and emphasise the increase of GDP while neglecting the promotion of quality of life. In order to achieve social justice, a welfare system which stabilises people’s income, provides equal education opportunities, boosts a fair and affordable medical system, enables the sharing of cultural products, reinforces an innovative social management through the encouragement of community-based management and promotes constitutionality, is required (06/03/2015).

The purpose of maintaining social justice is to sustain people’s livelihood with reference to individuals’ living conditions and the impacts of development projects and programs on actual daily lives (Sneddon, 2000, p. 534). Increasing the financial budget to improve the quality of life is often mentioned in the *People’s Daily* when talking about the livelihood/quality of life, or the Chinese term *minsheng* (492 references across 211 articles), in relation to sustainability. The enhancement of ordinary people’s quality of life nationwide is one of the key goals of national policies aimed at establishing a *Xiaokang* society (06/11/2015) and the sustainable development of the Chinese nation (10/03/2015). According to the discourses analysed, in order to achieve these goals, the Central government plans to allocate 70% of its tax revenue to *minsheng* issues, including providing funds for individual business in order to maintain a stable rate of employment, balance the pension rates between urban and rural areas, provide more scholarships for poor students from rural areas and promote equal medical services in both the urban and rural areas (06/03/2015). Furthermore, *minsheng* issues have a strong link to environmental sustainability. Caring for and benefiting people are the key aims of green development and the construction of ecological civilisation. According to President Xi Jinping, better environmental and ecological systems are public goods which benefit everyone (24/12/2015). Thus, improving the quality of the environment is a crucial way to improve

quality of life. If people cannot access clean water and air, safe food and comfortable environment, social conflicts and struggles for a better environment could result in social and political instability.

The widespread discourse on *suzhi* (which can be translated as ‘human quality’ and which refers to the physical and mental condition of people, their personal ability and cultivation, 95 references across 50 articles) which emerged in the 1980s is central to Chinese culture and governance in the contexts of economic neoliberalism. This term underscores the value of individuals and fetishizes the human body as a site for *suzhi* accumulation (Anagnost, 2004; Kipnis, 2007; Jacka, 2009). For the official discourse, a sustainable society needs moral and well-educated (ideal) citizens with high-level *suzhi* and at the same time personal development needs a sustainable social context. Therefore, enhancing people’s *suzhi* becomes a way to transform China’s population burden into human resources. That is, increasing the level of everyone’s *suzhi* is not simply a way of sustaining personal development, but also a motivation to improve social sustainability. In an article on the new goals for constructing a Chinese *Xiaokang* society (06/11/2015), Prime Minister Li Keqiang points out that material and spiritual lives are important to both Chinese people who want to enhance their own *suzhi*, and Chinese society, which needs citizens with high-level *suzhi*. China should strengthen its soft/cultural power through raising the individual’s physical, moral, scientific and cultural *suzhi*. Moreover, because social inequality is intrinsic to the discourse on *suzhi* (Kipnis, 2007; Jacka, 2009) – people are stratified based on their *suzhi* level – maintaining and increasing the overall *suzhi* in China can minimise class differences, a key goal of the Government’s strategies. The discourse of *suzhi* is also related to the ideas of responsibilities and obligations (Jacka, 2009). One of the key purposes of the enhancement of *suzhi*, according to an article on constructing a strong Chinese socialist culture (07/12/2015), is to cultivate every Chinese person to act morally, in order to make them take family and social responsibility and make contributions to the whole society. This discourse of *suzhi*, which highlights individual’s responsibility for national development, is more than a typical form of ‘blame the welfare Mom’ type neoliberal discourses which blame individuals for their lack of effort in the labour market. It is a way to naturalize and depoliticise social hierarchy and equate human capital to market value, and an institutional and public means to create compliant labouring bodies (Anagnost, 2004; Kinips, 2007).

To sum up, social sustainability is interpreted using *minsheng* and *suzhi* in the discourses constructed by the *People’s Daily*. These two terms are not merely related to sustaining the individual’s quality of life through national and local projects, but also as a way of governing personal life and stabilising society and the political system by the authorised government. In this sense, although the values of individuals are recognised by the State, these values are still considered to be subject to the collective or national interests.

Benefiting future generations (*Zaofu Zisun Houdai*): narrating intergenerationality from environmental and socio-cultural perspectives

The Brundtland Report emphasized that sustainable development has to ‘ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. This notion of intergenerationality is acknowledged in many articles in the *People’s Daily* with reference to the need to benefit future generations (*zaofu zisun houdai* in Chinese). Specifically, three

main aspects of the official discourses on 'intergenerationality (*dajji* in Chinese)' can be gleaned from the selected texts. Firstly, the intergenerational transmission of culture is important to cultural innovation. Cultural transmission is interpreted to be not only a way to inherit valuable traditional cultures but also a process of creating the cultural brand of China:

The accumulation of efforts, wisdom and experiences created generation by generation. It is left from the past generations through the form of cultural heritage. It is made from, belongs to and relates to our daily lives. It is not only a feature of Chinese culture but also a cultural economy.....cultural heritage promotes local economic growth and economic transformation (27/03/2015).

That is, the intergenerational transfer of Chinese culture is both about the conservation of traditional culture and a means of sustaining the local economy.

Secondly, reducing poverty is understood as a key goal of sustainable development in China (13/09/2015). The avoidance of the intergenerational transmission of poverty is the prerequisite of poverty eradication. For the articles published in *People's Daily*, preventing the intergenerational transmission of poverty requires constructing a better social welfare system (e.g. pension system, minimum living standard and nutrition promotion projects) in poor areas; improving the study conditions through building new schools and providing free compulsory education in poor areas; and improving the physical and cultural *suzhi* of poor people and cultivating their skills for employment (18/03/2015; 17/10/2015; 22/10/2015). Therefore, sustaining poor people's basic life, which can be achieved through providing sufficient social services and fair education opportunities, is important to the eradication of poverty.

Thirdly, the intergenerational discourse constructed by *People's Daily* makes a strong link between the well-being of future generations and the environment. China's economic development has been long-term dependent on its natural resources. Its ignorance of pollution prevention and ineffective environmental regimes, environmental pollution and the decrease of biodiversity are still severe ecological problems. In order to solve these problems and achieve the ecological civilisation, articles in the *People's Daily* argue that the Government should pay off the environmental debts and establish a 'green bank' for future generations (04/02/2015). That is, the current government should redress damage done to the environment for future generations. Such environmental debates are connected to Chinese traditional cultures and China's construction of ecological civilisation:

'Man is an integral part of nature' is a philosophic concept generated by our ancestors on the basis of their experiences of living with nature. It is an essence of Chinese culture which needs to be transmitted intergenerationally (18/03/2015).

China's construction of ecological civilisation respects nature, rather than transforms or destroys nature for satisfying people's needs; pursues social and ecological justice and ecological security, rather than maintains social justice based on human's needs; requires harmony between humans and nature, rather than pursuing the maximum benefits from the environment (17/10/2015).

Thus, the meanings of intergenerationality constructed by the *People's Daily* are subsumed under the economic-social-environmental sustainability in Chinese official discourse. These official

sanctioned understandings of intergenerationality encompass both the inheritance and transmission of natural resources and economic capital between generations.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this article, the question of how the concept of ‘sustainability’ is interpreted in Chinese official discourses constructed by the government-funded media in the post-socialist context has been explored, drawing on an analysis of articles published by *People’s Daily*. It is clear that the Chinese route to sustainability is discursively constructed as being a top-down unitary process which inscribes traditional (Confucian and Taoist) ideologies, socialist legacies (Marxist-Leninism and Maoist communist values), and the neoliberal approach of individualism (the Chinese discourse of *suzhi*) into the globally accepted economic-social-environmental sustainability. The key purpose of propagandising sustainability in Chinese society is to stabilise the social and political system and maintain the state-managed socialist market on the basis of a top-down strategy. That is, in post-socialist China, the discursive construction of ‘sustainability’ is dual-track: it is simultaneously a way to sustain the neoliberal-style market through the promotion of social justice and quality of life and an authoritarian process which highlights the submission of individuals to the state.

In contrast to the meaning of sustainability defined in Western countries with dominant neoliberal environmentalism and consumerism, which concentrate on individual responsibility, justice and scepticism primarily in relation to the environment (as we discuss elsewhere, Diprose et al. 2017), based on our discourse analysis, the Chinese government-leading interpretation of sustainability is constructed with the following two characteristics:

Firstly, people’s well-being and quality of life are placed at the centre of the officially sanctioned Chinese sustainability framework. Building up a people-oriented society is a key goal of current national strategies or plans, such as the Scientific Outlook of Development and Five Development Concepts and a consequence of social harmony. Under this socio-political context, the main purpose of sustainable development – or in the Chinese context the construction of ecological civilisation – is maintaining and enhancing individuals’ quality of life in the present and in the future. In order to achieve this goal, individuals’ basic needs should be met through the improvement of national welfare systems and through a national regime of raising personal *suzhi*.

And secondly, individuals’ contribution to social and environmental sustainability is highlighted. Unlike neoliberal discourses of self-governance, which encourage the blurring of private life and the political/public through the minimization of state power, the value of individuals in the Chinese socio-political context emphasises individuals’ contribution to the public/nation. This focus affirms a hierarchal political structure which places the collective and the nation ahead of the individual.

That is, for Chinese official discourse, the autocratic governance over socio-economic development and individuals’ daily life is at the heart of the meaning of sustainability. The media discourses of sustainability analysed in this research have been created in the post-socialist context of China rather than via a simple application of the globally accepted model of sustainable development. Adding Chinese-originated concepts, such as ecological civilisation, *suzhi*, *minsheng* and traditional ideologies of the human-nature relationship to the economic-social-environmental sustainability framework, the Chinese model can be understood as an alternative way to access sustainability in a

post-socialist context. Moreover, as a post-socialist concept, the application of sustainability in China uses an autocratic approach to solving unsustainable problems, which combines socialist state plans and the neoliberal market. Thus, the Chinese authority creatively reconceptualises the meaning of sustainability through Chinese language and rhetoric, in order to sustain its post-socialist one-party governance in China with endogenous ideas.

This article also offers an approach to broadening future understanding of the multiple connotations of 'sustainability' in different contexts. It suggests adopting a more international social and geographical approach to thinking about sustainability, as the meanings of this term deserve enrichment from the discourses constructed in different languages and from different national contexts. Understanding this term and its connotations based on analysis of how the concept of sustainability is talked about using local languages and rhetoric in different contexts and societies, rather than simply translating the term into different languages, is important if we are to build a full picture of the internationalised idea of sustainability. However, the findings of this article only represent government-led discourses on sustainability in China. Further works are necessary to connect these terms of sustainability formulated by the Chinese state to the actual implementation of environmental and social policies and popular narratives of sustainability in post-socialist China.

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