Living in an Ecological Civilization: Ideological Interpretations of an Authoritarian Mode of Sustainability in China

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Abstract

The proper analysis of environmental politics in different national contexts requires a returned focus on ideology. This article demonstrates that a neutral conceptualization of ideology is necessary to understand the way environmental politics integrates with social and cultural interpretations of how to manage environmental issues. The article examines Ecological Civilization, the Chinese Communist Party's interpretation of sustainability, to demonstrate that the ideology resonates across Chinese society. The article first analyses semantic themes within the Party's interpretation of Ecological Civilization, which continues to prioritize economic development over environmental protection. The article then shows that these themes are also prevalent in the media but are presented to the public utilizing different genres, styles and voice. Finally, by analysing the interpretation of Ecological Civilization from 245 residents of Chengdu, the article shows how some in China prioritize economic development, while others emphasize the importance of protecting the environment. The central finding is that in general residents support the government's heavy-handed approach to environmental policy, thereby reinforcing the state's authoritarian control over society. The article concludes by arguing that this finding is demonstrated by drawing from a neutral conceptualization of ideology and that such a framework should now be extended to other socio-political contexts.

Key words: environmental authoritarianism, environmental discourse, Functional Grammar, Grounded Theory

1. Introduction

With most nations of the world now agreeing to ratify the Paris Agreement in a show of support for the global environmental movement, there have been renewed calls to review how environmental politics are placed into action around the world. While 'sustainability' is defined according to social, economic and environmental factors (Goodland 1995), these concepts are interpreted and put into practice differently depending on the political context of a given country (Scoones 2016). As scholars of ecolinguistics have argued, language plays a crucial role in 'forming, maintaining, influencing or destroying relationships between humans, other life forms and the environment' (Alexander and Stibbe 2014: 105). Others have noted that environmental discourse structures the way we talk about environmental politics, which can be responsible for reproducing new and old social

inequities (Hajer 1995). In a recent article, Gunderson (2017: 279) rightly argues that we need to return to an analysis of ideology to 'show that the given policy mechanisms are based on ideological assumptions…and, thus, will not only be ineffective but will also reproduce the contradictory social order that gave birth to the given ineffective strategy'. To support this argument, Gunderson has drawn exclusively from an interpretation of ideology as 'contradiction-concealing ideas and practices', which means that only the ruling class can formulate and utilize an ideology (e.g. Langman 2015). Drawing from Larrain (1982), Gunderson argues that the contradictions between capital and environment are concealed through practices of denial, misunderstanding, displacement and dilution.[1] While environmental ideology can conceal the contradictory relationship between environmental protection and economic development, with this article I will empirically demonstrate that while analysing environmental politics it is far better for us to consider ideology as a 'set of ideas which arise from a given set of material interests' (Williams 1976: 156) that is used by various social groups to discuss the world-at-large (Gerring 1997). Utilizing the neutral conceptualization of ideology that Gunderson rejects, allows us to see how specific themes about sustainability emerge within policy, media and social discourse so that the contradiction between environmental protection and economic development is interpreted in a way that ensures economic development remains a political priority. Such a framework also allows for a degree of culturally contextual agency (Lukin 2017) among all social actors as to whether or not an ideology resonates with their own lived experience. To empirically demonstrate the importance of a neutral framework for analysing environmental ideology I draw on the current situation in the People's Republic of China (PRC) where, as Scoones (2016) noted, the authoritarian political structure contrasts starkly with the democratic Euro-American political structure that informs Gunderson's argument (see also Gunderson, Stuart and Peterson 2018).

In China, the authoritarian state led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has disseminated environmental ideology through state-controlled media in a metaphorical 'war' against pollution. The CCP is supposedly preparing the broader Chinese populace for life under what some have called environmental authoritarianism, defined as 'a decrease in individual liberty as governments seek to transform environmentally destructive behaviour' (Beeson 2010). This article will explore why, contrary to the expectations of citizens in Western Europe and the United States, some Chinese citizens are unperturbed by the state's concentration of authority to enforce the environmental behaviour of the public. As we will see, one reason for this is that the environmental ideology promoted by the Chinese state shares resonance with the way Chinese citizens believe environmental problems could be resolved. Ideological resonance does not necessarily mean agreement, which is why the article will also examine the implications of the continuities and discontinuities between the way the state and local residents of Chengdu, Sichuan interpret environmental ideology in China.

The Chinese Communist Party's ideological answer to sustainability under discussion in this piece is called Ecological Civilization or *Shengtai Wenming* 生态文明. On 22 July 2013, Ecological Civilization found its way to the front page of the People's Daily in an editorial by Ren Zhongping (2013), a pen name of an editorial group responsible for promoting ideological

developments within the Politburo (Tsai and Kao 2013). The article sent a clear signal to party members that Ecological Civilization would hold an important place within the larger ideological canon. The essay pulled no punches regarding the fact that lax environmental policies and emphasis on GDP growth contributed to China's environmental crisis leading to public unrest, even going so far as to highlight the normally sensitive topic of protests over the toxic chemical compound paraxylene (PX) that had unfolded across the country.[2] According to Ren Zhongping, 'In stark contrast with the daily increasing formation of an ecological environmental protection consciousness among the Masses is the backward development concept of a few leading cadres.'[3] The underlying argument within this editorial was that Ecological Civilization, as an ideological framework for guiding the future direction of Chinese politics, has emerged along with the rise in environmental consciousness among ordinary citizens. Thus, there is an assumption within the Party that Ecological Civilization represents the concerns citizens feel towards the contradiction between environmental protection and economic development. As we will see, this assumption is not entirely true, but uncovering the implications of this assumption can only be seen by examining interpretations of Ecological Civilization from multiple voices rather than assuming environmental ideology is only the domain of the ruling class.

The paper will thus proceed according to three steps. First, I will analyse how Ecological Civilization is interpreted by the CCP within a set of foundational documents. Next, I will examine a curated selection of media reporting related to Ecological Civilization. Finally, I will analyse the way Ecological Civilization is interpreted by 245 residents of Chengdu who participated in a household survey of environmental consciousness. While previous literature has examined the influence of alternative ideologies, such as Confucianism (Wu 2014), on CCP ideology, there has been minimal attempt to determine how well such ideologies resonate with the general populace. In this article by ideological resonance I am referring to the semantic content shared between the state and local residents of Chengdu in their interpretation of Ecological Civilization. This shared semantic content could be continuous, meaning it is used by both the state and local residents to support a similar interpretation of Ecological Civilization, or discontinuous, meaning that there is a conflict in how that semantic content is interpreted. The article follows Andreas Glaeser's (2011) scepticism that ideological resonance can be caused by the discursive actions of one group of social actors over another group and instead argues that resonating interpretations of an ideology tend to emerge among different social groups over a period of time and become shared through their interaction. Thus, the article examines the ideological resonance of Ecological Civilization throughout Chinese society by comparing the semantic content found in a set of foundational documents created by the Central Government, a selection of relevant media articles and the way residents of Chengdu interpret Ecological Civilization. I conclude by considering what the continuities and discontinuities in the various interpretations of Ecological Civilization could mean for China and reflect on the importance of a neutral conception of ideology in the analysis of environmental politics around the world.

2. Methods

Similar to Gunderson's position, many studies of ideology in China tend to begin from a definition that privileges the importance of political elites (e.g. Holbig 2009; Trevaskes 2011), however more recent studies draw from a more neutral conception of ideology (Sorace 2017). While ideology can be analysed according to conceptual, discursive and quantitative methods (Maynard 2013), I primarily focus on discursive analytics. To gain a better understanding of the way Ecological Civilization has formed within the CCP ideological canon, I draw on the linguistic tools of Functional Grammar to analyse the semantic organization of clauses within these documents (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 65-107). Although similar tools have been used by Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2003), a focus on semantic themes within discourse allows us to stay faithful to the neutral conception of ideology in Functional Grammar (Wodak 2001; Halliday 2003; Lukin 2017). While still in need of further refinement for the Chinese context, discursive analysis has provided key empirical insights into the sociolinguistic elements of ideology within the media (Joye, 2010; Pan 2014), including some analyses of environmental journalism (Chen 2014; Tong 2015). As far as I know, this is the first time Functional Grammar has been used to analyse the foundational documents of CCP ideology.

I will also utilize discourse analysis to examine the way semantic themes of Ecological Civilization are transmitted by the media when reporting environmental news in China. During January 2014-March 2015, I archived hundreds of articles related to Ecological Civilization, sustainability and other relevant environmental issues by accessing the media platforms discussed below on a daily basis. Because my goal is to show how a variety of media sources transmit information about Ecological Civilization to the public, the articles I have chosen to analyse here do not represent the kind of investigative environmental journalism expertly described by Tong (2015). As shown by Tilt and Xiao (2010), despite the influence the state holds over the media, environmental reporting in China does show variation across different sources. Thus, I draw from a wide range of media platforms that transmit environmental information to the public using different types of voice, genre and style (Fairclough 2003).

Beginning in December 2013, I also conducted an 18 month-long ethnographic study paired with a household survey in Chengdu, a city in Western China that is far less cosmopolitan than, for instance, Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, making it more representative of China's urban population. During October-December 2014, four collaborators from Sichuan University and I conducted 245 household interviews in seven housing estates in Chengdu's Jinjiang District. Random sampling of households was not possible as we could not obtain a sampling frame from any of the housing estates and in most cases both the local government and the housing estate management required us to proceed using either snowball sampling or a form of street-intercept sampling (Bernard 2006: 161).[4] We specifically selected the housing estates where we conducted our study because they included working-, middle- and upper-class households of Chengdu. Respondents were informed that the survey was part of a larger project to understand the level of environmental consciousness among residents in their housing estate. While

we collected information on all those living in the household, meaning a flat within the housing estate, the data analysed in the following sections is limited to the way the household member we interviewed interpreted Ecological Civilization. These qualitative interpretations of Ecological Civilization were analysed following a Grounded Theory methodology (Bernard 2006: 493-494) and organized into semantic themes for comparison with the discursive analysis of the Ecological Civilization foundational documents and the media articles.[5] It is through this comparison that we can see the way environmental ideology is not just the work of the ruling elite trying to obscure the contradiction between economic development and environmental protection, but also rooted in the way citizens conceive of culturally nuanced concepts like Ecological Civilization. Before we approach this comparison it is necessary to first understand the way the Chinese state has come to formulate the Ecological Civilization ideology.

3. What is an Ecological Civilization?

Early usage of the term 'ecology' (*shengtai* 生态) within PRC environmental policy can be traced to a scholarly interest in ecological agriculture (*shengtai nongye* 生态农业), from which the concept of Ecological Civilization first emerged in the late 1980s (Ye 1988). While Ecological Civilization had found its way into academic writings and state controlled media before the end of the millennium (Liu 1999; Wang 1997), it was after the transfer of power between Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao in 2003 that it became further integrated into Party ideology (Oswald 2014). The acceptance of Ecological Civilization into Party canon was also prefaced by the importance 'civilization' plays in other aspects of Party ideology (Dynon 2008). During the Hu Jintao era, a number of theoretical publications by high-level officials in the State Environmental Protection Agency established key concepts that were later found within the Ecological Civilization foundational documents analysed below. This included the importance of establishing a framework for environmental law, a culture of environmental protection, and a focus on resolving air, water and soil pollution, as well as promoting the harmonious economic development between individuals, society and nature (Pan 2003, 2006). Within the Party's interpretation of 'harmony', emphasis is placed on the need for coordination (*xietiao* 协调) among government agencies that tends to privilege economic development over environmental protection (Zhou 2008).

This emphasis on economic development is not always so explicit and in many cases party ideology attempts to obscure the preference for economic growth using various syntactic methods. For instance, after highlighting the dichotomy established in 'Western philosophy' between nature and humans, Vice-Minister Pan Yue argues that:

> Ecological Civilization believes that not only humans have subjectivity, nature also has a subjectivity; not only people have value, nature also has value; not only people have agency, nature also has agency; not only humans depend on nature, all living things depend on nature (Pan 2006: 16).

The repeated 'not only...also'[6] syntactic structure in this sentence is commonly seen in dialectal arguments found in Party ideology and in this case gives the reader the impression that neither humans nor nature are given dominance. However, such a structure cannot be sustained within Party ideology and Pan has to shift his grammatical structure in a following sentence:

> ...Ecological Civilization is a social formation that has completely unified the nature of humanity and ecology. This kind of unification is not submission of ecology within humanity, nor is it the submission of humanity within ecology. In today's language, the premise of a people oriented principle of ecological harmony is overall development for everyone (Pan 2006: 16-17).

Here 'not only...also' shifts to 'is not...nor is'[7] with the resulting clause becoming a synthesis of the dialectical phrases described in the sentence above. It would be difficult to argue such a synthesis points towards an eco-centric ideology as some have attempted (See Gare 2010). In fact, Ecological Civilization is precisely a submission of the ecological within humanity to ensure 'development *for everyone*', where 'everyone' is describing humanity and is not necessarily concerned with the ecological environment as a whole. This is highlighted by the 'people-oriented' concept invoked by Pan Yue, which, along with 'harmony', was a prominent semantic element within the Hu Jintao era ideological canon (Joshi 2012). Syntactic structures of this nature within the Ecological Civilization ideology mirror the hierarchical prioritization of some semantic themes over others, in particular economic development over environmental protection.

In the following section, I analyse the semantic themes found within the Ecological Civilization ideology through a close reading of two foundational documents: the 'General Scheme for the Reform of the Ecological Civilization System' (Chinese State Council 2015)[8] and the most recent iteration of the Environmental Protection Law (NPC 2014). The Environmental Protection Law (EPL) highlights the standards, rights, responsibilities and repercussions for various stakeholders in Chinese society as they impact the environment. In contrast, being a policy document that guided the formation of the 13th Five Year Guideline, the 'General Scheme' primarily provided officials with an outline of the environmental reforms that should be put into motion and the institutions that should be established in due time. Despite these differences, similar semantic themes are apparent across both documents. Here I draw from the Hallidayian concepts of the Theme, the sematic point of departure for a clause, and the Rheme,[9] the remainder of the clause in which the Theme is developed, to understand the way these two documents are semantically structured (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 65-107). By separating out the Themes and Rhemes within the individual Articles of these two documents we can see the connections between semantic content and demonstrate a hierarchy in the way that content is prioritized by the Party. According to officials I have interviewed, they are able to recognize and assimilate these structures after cursory readings of the documents. Elsewhere I extend this semantic analysis to show how similar semantic themes can be found across multiple Ecological Civilization foundational documents (Schmitt 2016: Chapter 3), but in this article I focus on these two documents because of their broad context and political importance within the central government. While Potter (2016) used a similar method to investigate ideological representations

in Arabic and English, here I use the Theme-Rheme analytic to focus on the formation of these semantic themes for comparison with the media articles and household surveys I discuss in the following sections. While I am unable to discuss this here, the themes discussed in this section are also useful for understanding how the semantic patterns shared across the Ecological Civilization ideology influence negotiations of environmental issues between different agencies. Six themes emerged from my analysis of the semantic organization of clauses within these two foundational documents: Quality, Transparency, Economics, Spatial Scale, Protection, and Responsibility.

The first theme, Quality, is related to guidelines for scientifically determined standards of environmental quality, monitoring methodologies for testing that quality at a given moment and assessment measures for determining how future development projects might influence that quality. When Quality is discussed in the General Scheme it is always connected with another economic policy goal. See for instance the 49th Article:

> …*clarify categories of standards and statistical criteria*…**to set a periodic evaluation of the rate of change of natural resource assets.**

This means that the primary reason for establishing environmental standards is not necessarily related to ensuring environmental health or ecological stability, but rather to evaluate the way natural resource depletion may affect economic development. Overall, the Quality theme plays an important role in determining how the relationship between environmental protection and economic development can be standardized and calculated. In rare cases, standards of environmental quality can also be used to limit economic development. The 19th Article of the EPL states:

> *Construction projects which do not implement an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) according to the law*…**must not begin construction**.

The pairing of these two clauses provides EIA with the power to use standards of environmental quality in the assessment process to limit future development projects. Thus, we can see that economic development is not totalizing in its priority over environmental protection, but it is still dominant throughout the ideology. Moreover, EIAs must be open to public scrutiny (NPC 2002; Tilt 2015: 110-116), meaning that some aspects of Ecological Civilization can span more than one theme, such as Quality and Transparency.

As a theme, Transparency is most evident in the 53rd Article of the EPL where the first sentence provides citizens 'the right to obtain environmental information as well as participate in and supervise environmental protection'. However, within the General Scheme the theme of Transparency can only be seen in the 38th article. This Article requires the regular reporting of environmental problems to the public.

> *The overall promotion of making atmospheric and hydrological environmental information open to the public*…**ensures that the Masses orderly exert their right to environmental supervision according to the law**.

Thus, the General Scheme stresses that Transparency is important primarily to keep public perception of environmental problems orderly and prevent the rise of unrest due to the uncertainty that comes from a lack of information. In other words, the state recognizes the importance of Transparency in constructing an Ecological Civilization, but only as long as the state can control the discourse in a way they deem 'orderly'.

This concern for 'order' is closely connected to the perceived need of stability for continued economic growth, which also explains the dominance of the Economic theme within the Party's interpretation of Ecological Civilization. The Economic theme is primarily focused on establishing funds, compensation mechanisms, asset management systems, financial exchanges and insurance packages for protecting the environment. This is particularly evident within the 43rd Article of the General Scheme

> ...*utilize an emission rights exchange*...**to obtain a beneficial mechanism for reducing emissions.**

Simply put, within the Economic theme of Ecological Civilization there is an assumption that economic tools are the best means for reducing environmental problems. A stranger example appears in the 31st Article of the EPL. Here the Theme states the need to:

> *'Establish a sound ecological protection compensation institution'*...

In contrast to other clauses I analysed, the Rheme in this Article is left unsaid. An identical semantic structure exists in the 52nd Article of the EPL that authorizes the establishment of environmental insurance. In other words, while the law requires the institutionalization of 'ecological protection compensation' and 'environmental insurance', the purpose of these Articles is not explained as it normally would be within the Rheme of such clauses. I interpret this lack of explanation as the result of the Economic theme being on the top of a semantic hierarchy within the ideology. By this I mean that the ideology does not need to explicitly state why economic tools would be beneficial for protecting the environment, because it is already assumed that such methods are effective. It should be emphasized that there is no evidence that those involved in developing these foundational documents intentionally structured these Articles so that they would obscure the contradictions of using financial tools to promote environmental protection. As we will see, it is far more likely that the worldview of these social actors simply does not recognize such a contradiction, which is why they assume such methods are effective and make them a priority in these documents. This placing of the Economic theme at the apex of the sematic hierarchy within Ecological Civilization is further highlighted by the fact that Articles related to other themes discussed above, such as the need for environmental quality standards, are specifically related to sustaining economic development.

The fourth theme, Spatial Scale, shows a similar relationship with economic development. The 13th Article of the EPL describes the way environmental protection agencies must negotiate with economic planning agencies at different spatial scales.

> *Content of the environmental protection guideline shall include goals, duties and guarantees for ecological protection and the prevention of pollution…***that link up with the major function zoning guideline, the land utilization general guideline and the urbanization guideline.**

Thus, the foundational documents are saying that environmental protection cannot be independent of economic policy goals at any scale in China. Moreover, while the Spatial Scale theme may be important for policy in general, it appears to have minimal relevance for environmental protection. For instance, the 10th Article of the General Scheme states:

> *Establish a foundation of main function zoning for regional policy…***to speed up the adjustment and perfecting of finance, production, investment, migration, infrastructure, resource development and environmental protection.**

In this Article there are many reasons for why main function zoning is important but environmental protection is the last reason to be mentioned while all of the other reasons are related to economic development.

Despite this the fifth theme, Protection, is commonly found within these documents and refers to the prevention, mitigation or treatment of environmental damage. Within the EPL discussion of environmental protection reads like a set of guidelines for officials rather than a legal structure.[10] For instance, the 51st Article of the EPL includes one of the few discussions related to environmental treatment.

> Establish a network for managing the technological treatment of water pollution…**and ensure its normal operation.**

The pairing of the Theme with this benign Rheme tells us very little other than that technology is an important part of treating environmental problems. The theme of Protection is not just about using technology for treatment but also about the enforcement of environmental laws and regulations for preventing environmental damage. For instance, the 40th Article within the General Scheme states:

> *Establish a system for the unity of authority in environmental enforcement…***which will provide the necessary conditions and means for the strong implementation of environmental enforcement.**

In other words, the Party's interpretation of Ecological Civilization is that the right to and responsibility for protecting the environment is primarily vested within the state rather than individuals.

The final theme, Responsibility, confirms this impression that the state is the primary entity responsible for ensuring that China is an Ecological Civilization. However, it also provides other stakeholders with rights as well as responsibilities. For instance the 57th Article of the EPL states:

> *If a citizen or organization discovers behaviour from a work unit or individual that pollutes the environment or damages ecology…***they have the right to report [the violation] to an environmental protection department**.

The Article does not clearly explain what an environmental protection department has to do with such information except that they must '**protect the legal interests of the accuser**'. In other words, there is a right and responsibility to report violations of the EPL, but nothing within the Article compels the government to take action against a violator. One of the most specific places that Ecological Civilization engages with Responsibility, however, lies in the cadre performance evaluations outlined in the 50th Article of the General Scheme

> *On the basis of the rate of change of the natural resource assets of a given administrative region during a leader's term of governance, objectively evaluate the cadre's performance in managing the natural resource assets…***then according to the law define the responsibility a cadre shall bear, to strengthen the application of the accounting results.**

Thus, evaluations are interpreted as being important for clearly outlining the responsibilities of cadres giving them more incentive to engage in the enforcement of environmental policy.

The analysis of the semantic content of these foundational documents shows that a concern for economic development still permeates the Party's environmental ideology much as it did in the past (Ross 1984). Additionally, while there is some discussion of providing information to the public and promoting participation, there is a stronger tendency in the documents to stress the responsibility and authority of the state to manage environmental issues. However, we still need to know to what extent we can see this semantic content outside of the Party, such as in the media. Additionally, we need to know in what ways these themes may or may not resonate with the public.

4. *Ecological Civilization and State-Controlled Media*

To take on the first issue, I examine the way media in the PRC has engaged with Ecological Civilization. The following section closely analyses a number of articles chosen because they come from well-known environmental media platforms.[11] Here I will discuss the way various media platforms in China use different forms of voice, genre and style (Fairclough 2003) to report on Ecological Civilization, sustainability and a range of environmental issues. Another reason to select these media platforms is that I found examples of the six themes from the foundational documents in articles from each platform. Thus, in this section, I examine the degree of ideological resonance that exists between the media articles and the foundational documents as well as how the media transmits these six themes of Ecological Civilization.

First, there is little resonance between the foundational documents and the media in the way the Spatial Scale theme is presented. This could be because media outlets understand that their readers may not be able to relate to the aspects of environmental issues that involve scales beyond their own community. We can see one example in a report regarding the release of a 'pollution source map' by the Sichuan Provincial Environmental Protection Agency (Zhu 2014) using the catchy headline: 'Hello, Polluting Enterprise, I would like to Give You a Call'. The language used here by the Chengdu Commercial Daily helps to soften the complicated GIS science used to design

the map allowing users to focus on whether or not a polluting industry is located near their home. This is an excellent example of how an Ecological Civilization theme can be transmitted by the media in a certain style that is more palatable to the public.

In contrast to the limited Spatial theme, Economics plays a strong role within many forms of environmental reporting. While considered a 'Party Paper' because it is primarily responsible for reporting information from the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), China Environmental News (CEN) is a key outlet for transmitting the latest news related to Ecological Civilization to the public. This paper occasionally draws on common metaphors to convey their argument. For instance, in an article published on June 5th, 2014 that argued for the use of economic measures to discourage enterprises from polluting the environment the author explained that '...even with increasingly strict monitoring, *fish still slip through the net*. Thus, in *declaring a war against pollution* it is even more necessary to use the '*invisible hand*'' (Li Xianyi 2014, emphasis added). We can easily find all three of these metaphors within popular culture in China. The use of the 'declaration of war against pollution' metaphor originated at the highest level of the government in a statement prepared by Premier Li Keqiang during the National Party Congress in March 2014 that was transmitted by the other key media outlet for promoting Ecological Civilization, the state run Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua 2014). Li's speech notably argued that pollution can be 'fought' just like poverty by using sound economic policy. These symbols are crucial for structuring the genre of the formal interview so that the information has the appearance of verbal discourse even though the content is still constrained by the same semantic structures seen in the foundational documents. China Central Television (CCTV) also exposes the general populace to such symbolism, particularly through the evening news broadcast *Xinwen Lianbo*, which might include a segment where a host reads a portion of a Xinhua released article or central government policy like the new EPL (CCTV 2014). Moreover, it is noticeable that the Economics theme is prominent in the reporting of the central government's media platforms, such as CEN, Xinhua and CCTV, only further emphasizing the key position of this theme within Ecological Civilization.

While the Quality theme appears regularly in central government media sources, it also appears in local media outlets where provincial and lower levels of government outline their environmental monitoring activities. One example comes from the Sichuan Daily focused on the monitoring of soil quality but, as is typical with such local articles, the report only included a list of recently enacted policies with no specifics as to what kinds of pollutants were actually being monitored (Liu Yunan 2014). Quality is also a popular theme within the genre of online news platforms that provide more in-depth environmental reporting. We can see an excellent example of the genre of online reporting in a special digital issue[12] from Caixin, a more independent nationwide media company. Beginning in April 2014 Caixin reported on the extremely high levels of benzene found in the drinking water system of Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, which caused residents to be without water for nearly four days (Zhang Xinran 2014). The digital issue included a report on clear violations of environmental standards of quality by the drinking water management company partially owned by the French

corporation Veolia (Ren 2014). Reports also focused on the initial attempts by local government officials to keep news of the violations quiet until national-level authorities forced them to release news about the benzene levels with a high degree of transparency (Lu 2014).

Within the media, the theme of Transparency can resonate closely with the interpretation seen in the foundational documents, but the media also draws on specific styles to transmit such content. For instance, a print article of the Guangming Daily, the mouthpiece of the Ministry of Propaganda, written just after the EPL was newly released included this headline: 'The New Environmental Protection Law: Do You Get It?' (Wang Yiyin 2014). In other words, the style originally common only in online media outlets has recently started to influence the typically more formal print newspapers. While articles like this stress the need for public participation to ensure that future development projects are environmentally more sustainable, this can also be controversial. Public participation in China is dependent on residents being invited to provide input into the design of a project by the developer or local EPA during the EIA process (Tilt 2015: 110-116). In extreme cases, residents may demand their voice be heard before a project begins construction. If the local government chooses to repress those voices, they risk radicalizing the local community (O'Brien and Deng 2015). Naturally, the central government does not view such situations to be good for social stability and even uses the media to communicate this to both state actors and concerned citizens. For instance an op-ed in the People's Daily from April 2nd, 2014, condemned environmental protests that took place against a refinery in the southern city of Maoming. However, at the same time the article pointed out that residents felt that they were not given the opportunity to voice their opposition to the project during the EIA process, which is why they began protesting (Li Zheng 2014). We can see, though, that only the People's Daily was allowed to place that voice in print, not the people themselves. As the primary propaganda tool for the CCP, the People's Daily is accessed by millions of readers everyday through various online platforms, including the People's Daily Environmental Protection page.[13]

Similar to the transmission of the Quality theme, the Protection theme has also been influenced by the digitization of Ecological Civilization. For instance on May 26th 2014, the People's Daily official WeChat account sent out a call for articles from the public to be included in a special column regarding China's 'Mother Rivers'[14] (People's Daily 2014). While all of the articles became part of a special online micro-webpage,[15] some were also included in the print edition as letters to the editor that included follow-up interviews by reporters. In nearly all of these letters, residents stressed the need for people to work together as a collective to clean up the river that ran through their community. While these articles stress that working together was important, they simultaneously emphasized the state's role in protecting the riverways. For instance, one letter described the successful treatment and recovery of the Fen River by the government in Taiyuan (Zhou 2014a) and included a photo spread article (Zhou 2014b), which has become a common format for providing readers with a visual stimulus of what an Ecological Civilization should or should not look like. Taiyuan is quite famous as one of China's major coal mining cities. Taiyuan's most recent Mayor, Geng Yanbo, implemented a form of environmental authoritarianism to make the city more

sustainable by shifting the focus of economic development from mining to tourism.[16] Even though, the 'pollute first, clean-up later' mentality has been critiqued within Ecological Civilization, most of the 'Mother Rivers' articles provide the reader with the feeling that there is a normal progression from pollution to treatment. However, an article about the Bo River stresses the important role of the state in governing environmental protection even after treatment is successful to ensure such damage does not occur again (Liu Hongchao 2014). Overall, the 'Mother Rivers' project transmitted the idea that protecting the environment was primarily the responsibility of the state, which also resonates with the Protection theme in the foundational documents.

While we can see the People's Daily has attempted to make their articles more appealing to a general audience, I would argue that they still do so using a singular voice, namely that of the Party, which tends to be true for most media in China. Some of the more independent media outlets, however, try to integrate multiple voices into their articles. We can see an excellent example of the Responsibility theme in a Southern China Weekend report about the establishment of the Environmental Court within the Supreme People's Court (Yan 2014). The journalist provides direct quotes from judges, officials, academics, and NGO activists that express a range of optimism for the new EPL that highlights the responsibilities and rights officials, firms and citizens have in protecting the environment. As the article explains, the new EPL is still unclear and requires further explanation, which is why the state established this special Environmental Court. The author goes on to describe the reaction an academic has to the establishment of the new Court: 'It's because the [lower courts] can't get an accurate fix on which cases they should hear in the end. Hmm, is there a chance they might offend the local government?...The Environmental Court of the People's Supreme Court was established not to hear cases but to provide direction.' Here the author used colloquial phrases like 'accurate fix' and 'Hmm' to express a kind of rhetorical question and to establish trust with the reader. Direct verbal quotes from a prominent expert and the inclusion of multiple voices within an article about environmental issues helps build trust with the reader to communicate the idea that the state will be responsible for the development of an Ecological Civilization.

The inclusion of multiple voices within the media reports does not necessarily mean that a relationship between the public and the media will result in a Habermasian form of civil society that will successfully monitor the practices of environmental officials and polluting industries. Tilt (2010) has argued local cadres are most effective in promoting sustainable practices when the media is able to turn a critical lens to environmental degradation caused by polluting industries and individuals. The media, however, is still controlled by the state, which will utilize censorship and coercion to enforce social stability at the expense of environmental information transparency (Tong 2015), thereby limiting the ability of the media to influence environmental governance.[17] This does not necessarily mean the central government is requiring media reports to reflect the Ecological Civilization ideology perfectly. Self-censorship is a common way for journalists in China to avoid politically sensitive 'minefields' (Tong 2009). Part of the self-censorship process is reporting news that is important to readers but is also conscious of

the limitations imposed upon the media by the state. From this perspective, it is understandable that the way the media presents the Ecological Civilization ideology would resonate closely with the semantic content found in the foundational documents. In the next section, I will now examine how the ideology resonates with residents interviewed in Chengdu in late 2014.

5. Interpretations of Ecological Civilization in Chengdu

In some cases, the Chinese media may have structured reports about environmental issues so that they more closely resemble everyday discourse, but it is also important to realize that most residents of Chengdu were not ignorant of environmental issues before Ecological Civilization became so central to Party ideology. As we will see below, there are continuities and discontinuities between the official and local interpretation of Ecological Civilization, the variation of which undoubtedly reflects an older and more localized environmental ideology that has existed for many years.

A question in the household survey we conducted in Chengdu was very straightforward: What is your own definition of an Ecological Civilization? Here I will examine the key themes that emerged from the answers to this question according to an inductive Grounded Theory methodology (Bernard 2006: 493-494). This is an iterative process of thoroughly combing through these qualitative interpretations of Ecological Civilization to find semantic patterns, or themes, that recur with a regular frequency (N≥3). Because we interviewed a large number of individuals (n=245) the possible range of themes was quite broad. Twenty-two distinct themes emerged and for clarity I have organized them according to some interconnecting theme groups. The Individual group (see Figure 2, Yellow Highlights) I interpret to be the aspects of Ecological Civilization related to the expectations of an individual's level of environmental knowledge and behaviour. The Health group of themes (Brown) are broadly construed comments on issues related to health through the lens of Sanitation and Pollution. They are contrasted with the following Environmental Issues group (Dark Blue), which include more specific themes related to the environment. In contrast to the Individual Group, the Collective Group (Forest Green) of themes tends to focus on relationships between the human and non-human world or in human society as a whole. Finally, some respondents (12%) claimed to have no knowledge of Ecological Civilization. The shared semantic resonance between the official interpretation of Ecological Civilization and those residents who were able to provide us with their own interpretation is abundant. This is made clear by examining representative quotes from this data in the following section. It is crucial to note that these shared themes could result in continuous or discontinuous interpretations of the ideology, meaning that the ambiguity of Ecological Civilization allowed residents to interpret the semantic content of the ideology in ways that are similar or in some cases even contradictory to the state's interpretation.
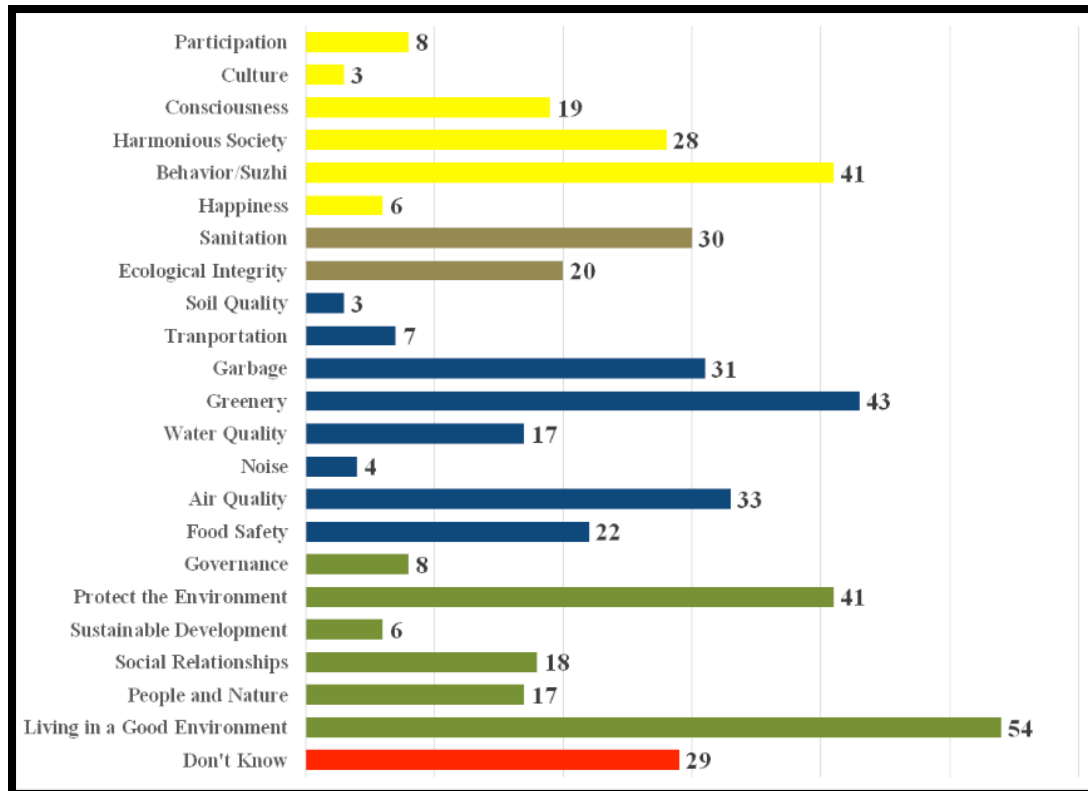
Figure 1: Frequencies of Ecological Civilization Themes among Residents of Chengdu[18]

The most obvious example of continuity relates to the concern for Quality as discussed in the foundational documents and the media that matches some of the local interpretations of Ecological Civilization as discussed within the Environmental Issues group of themes. It was common for residents to simply list off a number of different environmental quality related issues that they were concerned about rather than go into much depth on each topic. For instance, a representative interpretation from one resident included the idea that 'Ecological Civilization is about drinking clean water, breathing clean air, eating safe foods, using safe commodities and society is harmonious and healthy'. The theme of Sustainable Development is also continuous with how that concept is reflected in the Economic theme of the official interpretation. For instance, one resident defined Ecological Civilization as equivalent to 'sustainable development, which means we will combine the quality of life with environmental protection'. Thus, by equating sustainable development with Ecological Civilization, some residents simply assumed that integrating quality of life, or economic development, with protecting the environment would be easy. This is similar to the way the Economic theme in the foundational documents assumed that economic tools were the best way to protect the environment. However, as we will see below, residents do not always prioritize these issues in the same way.

Concern for Protecting the Environment and Living in a Good Environment are also two of the more salient themes for respondents (17% and 22% respectively). Both of these themes from the Collective group were also used as catch phrases to help residents connect Ecological Civilization to an environmental discourse that was more relevant to their everyday lives. For

instance, one resident simply said: 'Having an Ecological Civilization means that everyone needs to protect the environment, which includes self-respect and self-love'. Thus, residents are interpreting Ecological Civilization through semantic themes related to the concept of the Collective in a manner that is similar to the way the theme of Protection emerged in the media articles discussed in the previous section. However, responses by residents also exhibit a feeling of a matter of course. In other words, residents take it for granted that in an Ecological Civilization the environment will remain healthy and protected for society, but they do not clearly express how directly engaged in that process they should be. Overall, we should be cautious in assuming that the continuity that can be seen is the result of a cause-effect relationship of state ideology somehow forming this local interpretation. It is better to recognize that these interpretations are arising together across Chinese society to form a shared understanding of what life in an Ecological Civilization should be like.

Moreover, discontinuity between the themes of Ecological Civilization in the foundational documents and residents' interpretations were also obvious. For instance, as one resident explained: 'Ecology is a circle and Civilization is within it. If there is a good ecological environment, then the quality of human civilization will come to match it.' In comparison with the way Pan Yue (2006) described the relationship between Ecology and Civilization, this resident's interpretation reverses that connection. Moreover, residents were quite critical of the dominant Economic theme of Ecological Civilization. For instance, one resident explained: 'Ecological Civilization is about the fact that the entire environment is globalized, you cannot depend on localized nations to resolve problems...national-level policy cannot pursue economic benefit at the cost of destroying the environment.' This resident is expressing her dissatisfaction through the theme of Governance by highlighting the Chinese state's obsession with allowing economic development to determine the way it governs. Overall, it is noticeable that responses by residents who were similarly critical of the state also felt economics was not connected to an Ecological Civilization or that it was of secondary importance to cleaning up the environment. These residents are not necessarily suggesting there is a need for more social participation in an Ecological Civilization, but rather that the state should use its authoritarian power to de-prioritise economic development in environmental policy.

Discursive analysis also demonstrates a discontinuity between residents' interpretations and media representations of Transparency. For instance, none of the residents mentioned an entitlement to receive environmental information about polluting industries. However, a number of residents described the importance of participation in this way: 'Environmental protection requires that every person gives it their full attention and participation.' Here participation is akin to an understanding that individuals have a responsibility to protect the environment in their everyday lives, for instance, by engaging in sustainable consumption practices. The Participation theme for residents of Chengdu did not mean engaging in a kind of democratic oversight of polluting industries. Residents are very much aware that controlling their own behaviour toward the environment is important. This Behaviour theme draws from a very familiar discourse in China that only people with a specific 'social quality', or *suzhi* in Chinese (Anagnost 2004),

know how to behave in a proper civilized way. Within an Ecological Civilization context, this means that an individual with the right social quality (generally assumed to be those with higher levels of education and social class) knows how to properly interact with the environment. Moreover, respondents who highlighted this theme felt that it is the responsibility of all citizens to emulate 'civilized' behaviour in order to achieve an Ecological Civilization. Thus, for residents of Chengdu, the idea of participation is discontinuous with the way the Responsibility and Transparency theme are presented in the foundational documents and the media as being primarily the realm of the state.

This feeling that Ecological Civilization includes an individual's responsibility to engage in sustainability is most likely due to the semantic connotations that the word Civilization brings to mind, which are not much different from the ideas of 'social quality'. While there is a tension between the state and the citizen within the foundational documents and media reports, we can see that for residents of Chengdu the Collective and Individual themes are not necessarily contradictory to each other, but rather mutually reinforcing. Residents do not necessarily expect to have to participate in the monitoring of other Chinese citizens, but they do feel strongly that they should discipline their own behaviour so that it is appropriate for living within an Ecological Civilization. In terms of Collective themes, they are quite open to the idea that the state could use its power to monitor the behaviour of citizens and enterprises. Residents' lack of interest in having access to environmental information or participating in the monitoring of proper environmental management practices does not mean that they let the government off the hook. As we can see, they in fact have very high expectations for the state to improve environmental quality, in some cases even at the expense of economic growth. This helps explain why in Chinese society there may be a greater acceptance of a top-down authoritarian style of environmental governance. While some may assume that the ruling elite in an authoritarian state would be hesitant to allow the kind of semantic variation seen in our survey, I would argue that by drawing from a neutral conception of ideology we can see why that may not be so. Semantic variation is precisely 'how language participates in creating, maintaining and changing ideological stances' (Hasan 2016: 120). Ultimately, the variation and discontinuity seen in interpretations of the ideology are also part of the reason that it can still resonate within Chinese society and even maintain the continued domination of the authoritarian state within environmental politics.

6. Conclusion

Contrary to Ren Zhongping's argument introduced at the beginning that Ecological Civilization is a mirror of the public's rising environmental consciousness, this article has demonstrated that as the foundational documents were emerging into the CCP's ideological canon, a certain amount of discontinuity between the official and local interpretation of the ideology occurred. While this is to be expected, it is surprising that the state has so far not utilized the ideology to engage more directly with the public. After all, the party, according to Ren Zhongping, recognizes that the need for the

incorporation of an environmental ideology like Ecological Civilization into the PRC's mode of governance arises from the public discontent with the current environmental crises spreading across the country. It is not clear that the Party will change its obsession with economic development even as these environmental crises intensify. This is precisely why the Chinese state has attempted to shift the focus away from the contradiction between environmental protection and economic development towards the issue of responsibility. Attaching the concept of ecology to that of civilization resonates deeply within Chinese culture and as we saw above the general public is open to the idea that being civilized includes behaving in a way that is environmentally-friendly. In some ways this is quite similar to the 'exhortation approach' described by Lester Ross (1984) more than 30 years ago.

A new finding from analysing the semantic themes discussed in this article is that the responsibility for enforcing environmentally-friendly behaviour lies in the Party alone and that the public tends to agree. While this undermines the possibility of participatory activism that we might expect from a Habermasian interpretation of environmentalism, many of the residents interviewed in this study felt the state should take even more responsibility and control over the monitoring of environmental behaviour. The truly disconcerting problem that now confronts the Chinese state is the possibility that they will continue to fail in their ability to use their authoritarian power to improve the environmental situation. Chinese citizens have high expectations for their government and, at the moment, some also exhibit a great deal of dissatisfaction.

Despite the fact that the Chinese political system is quite different from other countries of the world, I believe that we can learn an important lesson from tracing the emergence of Ecological Civilization from Chinese social discourse. Namely, that even in a highly authoritarian system environmental ideology is not necessarily a tool designed by the ruling elite to obscure the contradictions between environmental protection and economic development in order to reproduce the social structures that ensure their continued control over society. As we saw, central government officials and some residents of Chengdu share a worldview that assumes there is no contradiction between environmental protection and economic development. Gunderson (2017) might sweep aside the ideological resonance discovered in this study as the result of false consciousness. This interpretation, however, inherently assumes that the analyst is somehow free of ideological influence, which is intellectually unproductive and runs the risk of misinterpreting the political situation within a given cultural context. For instance, in China it is not only the contradiction between environmental protection and economic development which ensures the reproduction of social structures allowing the ruling elite to remain in power. The belief that the individual should focus more on their own behaviour towards the environment than on monitoring the environmental management practices of the state and that the state should in fact take more responsibility for managing the environment than they do already also serves to reproduce these structures. Since this is true, it is entirely possible that even should the CCP decide to reverse the priority so that environmental protection would supersede economic development within Ecological Civilization policy, the ruling elite could remain in power, since that is what many residents we interviewed want to see happen anyway. Again, this

conclusion could only be possible if one utilizes a neutral conceptualization of environmental ideology. What might we now gain if we trained such a framework upon the environmental politics within liberal democratic societies in other parts of the world? As China becomes a central player in global environmental politics, the far more difficult but also very relevant question that this article should pose to us is whether it is a good thing that environmental protection could become a priority over economic development when it emerges through the political structures of authoritarianism. For many residents of Chengdu it matters not, which is a direct result of a shared worldview and resonating interpretations of what it means to live in an Ecological Civilization.

Notes

1 It should be noted that the 'misunderstanding, displacement and dilution' of these contradictions does not necessarily demonstrate the intention to conceal. For more on the linguistic implications of intentionality across cultures see Duranti (2015). The fact that these three features of ideology do not necessarily demonstrate intention within a given cultural context only reiterates the need to view ideology as emerging through social discourse across many social strata rather than as a linguistic formula constructed by a scheming ruling elite. The only case where the intentionality of ideology could be definitively demonstrated empirically is through the creation of fabrications to support the 'denial' of the contradictions analysed by Gunderson.

2 Regarding the recent PX protests see Steinhardt and Wu (2016).

3 All translations in this article are my own.

4 For a detailed explanation of sampling and the methods used to create the survey tool see Schmitt (2016: Chapter 3).

5 Because the surveys were verbal rather than textual, an analytical method other than Functional Grammar was necessary to analyse the semantic content of the responses to our survey questions. However, as I will show below, the methodologies of Functional Grammar and Grounded Theory are useful for discovering continuities and discontinuities when making comparisons across the two sets of semantic content related to Ecological Civilization.

6 *Bujin…ye* 不仅…也

7 Bushi…yebushi 不是…也不是

8 Shortened to 'General Scheme' below.

9 Following functional grammar analysis, I capitalize Theme and Rheme when discussing these concepts below. I also *italicize* the Theme and **bold** the Rheme when writing out the clauses.

10 Alford and Shen (1998: 417-418) made a similar point about the 1995 edition of the EPL.

11 For instance some of the platforms described below are regularly included within a list of most accessed environmental media platforms composed on a weekly basis by Southern China Weekend, for an example see: http://toutiao.com/i6282603289754206722/

12 See http://china.caixin.com/2014/lzzls/index.html

13 http://env.people.com.cn/ They also have separate environmental accounts for their Weibo and WeChat microblog platforms. For readers unfamiliar with these social media platforms, they are similar to Twitter and Facebook respectively. See below for further explanation of these two formats.

14 This is a common term that invokes feelings of national pride in China's rivers as a historical point of origin for the Chinese civilization.

15 http://env.people.com.cn/GB/383320/383720/index.html

16 Mayor Geng initially developed such a model in another of China's industrial urban centres, Datong. For more on the details of this transition see Eaton and Kostka (2013).

17 Kay, Bo and Sui (2015) argue that this is also true for social media's engagement with the air pollution problem in China.

18 Themes represented by the figure are not mutually exclusive, meaning that a resident may have provided responses that were coded into more than one theme.

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