

## **Well-being rather than well-having:**

A Critical Analysis of Sharing Economy discourses in the Chinese context

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Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,  
No 2017:040

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University  
International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science  
(30hp/credits)



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Submitted May 16, 2017

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## **Abstract:**

The sharing economy, which is an Internet-mediated economic model based on sharing practices, presents the potential to reshape nature-society interactions with relevance for leading to transformative change for environmental and social aspects of sustainability. It is widely presented as a model leading to environmentally sustainable pathways through reduced resource use and reduced levels of consumption and an increased use of idle assets, while also promoting social sustainability through rebuilding social relationships and enabling wider and more equitable access to resources. Given its recent emergence, the sharing economy concept is actively being debated, shaped and framed by a wide array of social actors. These discursive constructions have implications for the wider social practices of the sharing economy.

Through firstly conducting a literature review, current understandings of the sharing economy are presented and their relevance for the Chinese context outlined. Further, a critical discourse analysis following Fairclough's methodology is carried out in order to analyse the dialectical relations between discourse and wider social and economic developments and processes of change. In particular, I analyse how the sharing economy is discursively constructed in the Chinese context by the political, corporate, academic and public discourse fields and how these discursive constructions are redefining the Chinese economic growth discourse.

The findings of my analysis of the political discourse on the sharing economy in the Chinese context suggest that discursive constructions of the sharing economy do not contribute to the transformative potential the sharing economy presents for environmental and social aspects of sustainability, but instead are utilized to advance and uphold the reformist sustainable development construct of ecological civilisation to guide China's future green development path. The findings of my analysis of the corporate, academic and public discourses on the sharing economy in the Chinese context indicate that this discursive framing is not being challenged, but maintained by the analysed corporate discourse and only partly challenged by the analysed academic discourse. The analysed public discourse on the sharing economy in the Chinese context is shown to more challenge the discursive framing of the sharing economy as a supportive function of the Chinese ecological civilisation construct than to reproduce it.

These findings showcase the importance of fostering critical language awareness, which can help in identifying constraining forces on discursive constructions that work to avert transformative changes for sustainability. Critical language awareness can thus enable us to become aware of how discursive constructions shape approaches to sustainability challenges.

**Keywords: Sharing Economy, China, Critical Discourse Analysis, Ecological Civilisation, Green Development, Sustainability Science**

**Word count: 13 982**

## **Acknowledgements**

*Thank you to Maryam, whose supervision provided me with invaluable feedback to guide my research process in the right direction. Your wealth of knowledge and insights are inspiring.*

*Thank you to Marietta and Ieva, who were the most supportive supervision group.*

*Thank you to the wonderful Lumes family, of which each and every family member's individual character and values have contributed to the constellation that we formed, making these past two years one of the most beautiful experiences.*

*Thank you to the Strawberry Farm, which has provided me with the most welcoming and funnest home I have lived in throughout my studies.*

*Thank you to Tahreem, for proofreading this thesis and for always being there for me, despite the distance.*

*Thank you to Yann Arthus-Bertrand, whose film series 'Human' helped me see the larger picture at times of feeling lost within the depths of my research.*

*Thank you to my friends, who provided me with support and kind words, whether near or far.*

*Thank you especially to my parents, for their continued support and love. We have never been further apart, yet never so much closer.*

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# 1 Introduction

The Earth system is undergoing global changes, largely driven by humankind. It is humankind's capacity to imagine a world different to the one we live in, continuously striving for "an alternative social order and cooperating to create it" (Chang, 2016, p.xi) that has led to these changes. This has had and especially today has major implications for the functioning of the Earth's biophysical systems and its element stocks and flows. The increasing rate and magnitude of human development has significantly altered the relationship between humans and nature, having given rise to the consideration of humankind as representing an own global geophysical force (Steffen et al., 2007). As humankind continuously attempts to create different realities from the existing ones, this altered human-nature relationship has led to the emergence of international research efforts which give large focus to the study of the pervasive and rapid environmental changes having taken place during the Anthropocene, including human-induced climate change. This sustainable world discourse has especially been developed during the last forty to fifty years, which has seen the development of modern environmentalism, out of which have emerged a plethora of discourses on and practices of sustainable development (Clifton, 2013). Despite the creation of and constant reshaping of the sustainable development concept within political, academic, business and civil society circles, large amounts of the world population are not living sustainably. In fact, three out of nine defined planetary boundaries have already been transgressed, posing serious threats for humanity to be able to stay within its safe operating space (Rockström et al., 2009).

Given the multitude of relentless pursuits in envisioning and creating alternative pathways of sustainability in the last four decades and the recognition that these "have not generated sufficient transformative power to impact on the underlying socio-economic drivers of unsustainability" (Heinrichs, 2013), the exploration of new pathways towards sustainability is being called for. This is reflected in the emergence of debates around post-growth and de-growth (Heinrichs, 2013). Tying into this debate are the ideas of the sharing economy (SE) and associated collaborative consumption. While the act of sharing itself has existed since humankind, the phenomena of the SE and collaborative consumption have newly emerged with the rise of the Internet (Belk, 2014b). These represent a new Internet-mediated model of economics, which targets different distribution and use patterns of the Earth's resources based on principles of sharing. Given the relatively recent emergence of academic research on the SE, there still exists uncertainty as to the defining of the concept. However, it is argued that this model holds the potential to transform the world economy



towards sustainability, presenting the opportunity to lead to environmentally sustainable pathways through reduced resource use and consumption and increased use of idle assets, while also promoting social sustainability through rebuilding social relationships and enabling wider access to resources (Stokes, Clarence, Anderson & Rinne, 2014). In 2011, the SE was named one of ten ideas that will change the world by the 'Time' (Walsh, 2011). In fact, there has been an observable SE boom in everyday life, with the size of the SE estimated to have reached around \$26 billion (Malhotra & Van Alstyne, 2014). While this economic model's academic and public defining is still in the making, with academic defining considerably lagging behind public defining, new research projects across the world, including in the research program of Sustainability Science, have taken on the quest to explore its conceptual underpinnings, as well as associated potentials and challenges.

With this thesis, I thus aim to contribute to knowledge production for sustainability science in the newly emerging research field on the SE, focusing on the defining and shaping of the SE in the Chinese context. As the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions, China plays a leading role in determining necessary action for climate change mitigation and adaptation (Schreurs, 2011), which is not only of importance to its own inhabitants but to all of humanity. Examining how the political, corporate, academic and public societal fields perceive and shape ideas on the SE has important implications for contributions to the future development of research efforts as well as direct actions taken for ensuring global change towards sustainability.

### **1.1 Research aims**

In this thesis, I want to find out how SE ideas are discursively framed in the Chinese context and subsequently, determine whether the foundations for realizing the potential that the SE presents for environmental as well as social aspects of sustainability are being laid in China. Tied to this research aim is the need to first examine existing understandings of the sharing economy and their relevance in the Chinese context. Thus, my study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are different understandings of the SE and what are their relevance in the Chinese context?

2. How are SE discourses formed and framed in the Chinese context by different societal actors?

2.a Within the SE discourse, how are environmental and social aspects of sustainability negotiated and framed?

2.b What are the implications for redefining the Chinese economic growth discourse?

3. How does this thesis contribute to shaping a new reality of the SE and how does this in turn contribute to addressing sustainability challenges in China?

Given the relevance of the potential that the concept of the SE presents for leading to positive systemic changes for the environment and society through fostering new cultures of resource consumption and distribution, it is important to examine how different fields of discourse constitute the SE and to inquire into the “various, and often contradictory roles that different agents and principals play in sharing economies” (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014, p.293). In light of this research task, I have decided to conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) according to Fairclough’s methodology, which presents one particular approach within discourse analysis. In general, discourse analysis can be said to seek to explore the ways in which language use creates, shapes and changes the social world order and social relations, assuming that there are no neutral representation of this world (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). It will thus be a variety of text-featuring documents that will form the empirical focus of my analysis. The decision to employ Fairclough’s approach to CDA was made based on the actuality of his approach being the “most developed theory and method for research in communication, culture and society” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 60), which I deemed most suitable for the critical study of existing and emerging SE discourses in the Chinese context.

## **1.2 Research outline**

In Chapter 2, I will conduct a literature review in order to find out what the different understandings of the SE are, followed in Chapter 3 by outlining what the relevance of these understandings is in the Chinese context. In Chapter 4, the ontological and epistemological considerations of my research methodology will be touched upon, while mainly introducing Fairclough’s approach to CDA, which serves as the methodological tool for my analysis. This is followed by my carried out CDA of the sharing economy discourses in the Chinese context in Chapter 5, with the findings discussed in Chapter 6 and concluding remarks made in Chapter 7.

## **2 The Sharing Economy: An alternative pathway to sustainability?**

In order to find out how SE ideas are discursively framed in the Chinese context, an understanding of what exactly underlies the idea of the SE and its relevance in the Chinese context needs to be established. Thus, in order to answer RQ1, a literature review was conducted. This is essential in creating “a firm foundation for advancing knowledge” (Webster & Watson, 2002, p.13) on the topic in question. A non-systematic approach was taken, as the purpose was not to “provide as complete a list as possible of all the published and unpublished studies” (Cronin, Ryan & Coughlan, n.d.) but to provide a reflective overview of different understandings of the SE and based on this, justify the asking of RQ2 (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011).

### **2.1 Emergence and defining of the sharing economy concept**

The SE is a term that has started to emerge around a decade ago, but that has especially in recent years experienced an upsurge in interest and stimulated debate amongst a wide range of social actors (Henwood, 2015; Martin, 2016). Its emergence has been accompanied by contestations as to its exact defining, with multiple terms denoting its idea, such as ‘collaborative consumption’, ‘collaborative economy’, ‘on-demand economy’, ‘post-ownership economy’ and ‘access-based consumption’ (Belk, 2014b). While the concept undisputedly entails elements of social exchanges based on sharing as well as communication technologies to aid these sharing exchanges, various specifics to the concept have been explored. Botsman and Rogers, arguably the “pioneer[s] of the collaborative consumption movement” (Riley, 2012) refer to the SE as a new ‘economy and culture model’ of collaborative consumption, which features “systems of organized sharing, bartering, lending, trading, renting, gifting, and swapping” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a). They differentiate between three types of systems including for-profit systems. These include product service systems, where goods are offered as service rather than sold as a product, redistribution markets in which used products are swapped or sold and a collaborative lifestyle, where people come together to share spaces, skills and assets (Botsman & Rogers, 2010a).

In comparison, Belk makes a more strict distinction between what can actually be defined as sharing and other forms of exchange that merely represent “commodity exchanges wrapped in a vocabulary of sharing” (Belk, 2014a, p.7). This he terms ‘pseudo-sharing’, arguing that despite its potential

benefits for social and environmental sustainability, 'pseudo-sharing' needs to be distinguished from true sharing practices. This is attributed to the apparent characteristics of 'pseudo-sharing', which tend more towards motives of profit and egoism, expectations of reciprocity and lack of community feelings (Belk, 2014a). Further, he identifies four different types of 'pseudo-sharing': long-term renting, which creates a 'proprietary sense', short-term rental, which is mostly for profit, online sites which 'share' users' personal data and online-facilitated barter economies, which may not involve money but reciprocal exchange instead (Belk, 2014a). The types of true sharing practices Belk has identified are the sharing of information online (contributing to feelings of an online community), online-facilitated offline-sharing (exchange of free goods without expectations of reciprocity), peer-to-peer online sharing, for example of intellectual property, and finally online-facilitated hospitality (Belk, 2014a). Thus, according to Belk, what characterizes true sharing is the motive to share with and help others while making connections, not the motive to grant access or gain access to something (2014a). This defining, however, takes a predominant focus on social- rather than environmental sustainability motives. Others have argued for a more encompassing definition, taking into account various forms of sharing (Botsman & Rogers, 2010b; Heinrichs, 2013), including gift-giving and commodity exchange improved through technology to be included in one single model, since these all represent forms of alternative consumption (Corciolani & Dalli, 2014).

## **2.2 The transformative potential of the sharing economy**

The relatively recent emergence of the SE concept and the inconsistency in its definitions and understandings impedes the ability to fully assess the potential that the SE holds for leading to systemic changes for environmental and social sustainability. Nonetheless, it has strongly been argued that the SE presents an opportunity for environmental and social change in terms of changing the way current production and consumption systems function as well as in the resetting of our social contracts (Martin, Upham & Budd, 2015; Shor, 2014). For instance, while certain SE models currently function as disruptive technologies to traditional business operations, leading to fewer purchases, these also present the opportunity to modify existing ideas of ownership, shifting towards non-ownership models of using consumer goods and services (Belk, 2014b; Cusumano, 2015; Martin, Upham & Budd, 2015). This has implications for the shaping of identities, enabling alternative ways of consuming and expressing identity without ownership, while also presenting the development of a new business paradigm (Belk, 2014b). As such, this can have considerable impacts for issues of global warming, air pollution and fuel and raw material reserves (Belk, 2014b) through changing the way

current production and consumption systems function towards a more efficient use of resources (Botsman & Rogers, 2010b; Martin, Upham & Budd, 2015).

It has also been highlighted that the potential the SE presents for environmental as well as social sustainability is of special relevance for the urban context, where the development of the SE is especially gaining momentum due to the density as well as existing IT infrastructure of urban areas (Cohen & Munoz, 2016). As a result, the term 'sharing city' has emerged, where the SE impact has been observed to be highest, with car-sharing and bike-sharing schemes to have emerged in more than 500 cities worldwide (Cohen & Munoz, 2016). Such shared mobility programs are particularly interesting in the urban context as its implications for sustainability can be especially relevant for urbanization processes linked to increasing city populations and city densities (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014). With the transportation sector accounting for around 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC, 2014), car-sharing can thus be argued to present a sustainable form of transportation through leading to significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through reduced car ownership (Shaheen et al., 2012; Teubner & Flath, 2015) However, the promises these programs hold for solving issues such as congestion, traffic and pollution can be severely hampered if the models in place fail to uphold an optimal relationship between service providers and local governments. Thus, the extent to which the common objective of sustainable mobility can be reached depends largely on the extent to which agency conflicts are minimized (Cohen & Kietzmann, 2014).

### **2.3 The capitalist tendencies of the sharing economy**

However, another narrative of the SE has evolved alongside the narrative of an alternative economic model presented above. It is one that claims the SE to present yet another capitalistic expression of business-as-usual economics, making clear that the SE accounts for a paradoxical defining process (Richardson, 2015). While providing potential sustainability solutions, the rapid development of the SE has also led to a multitude of problems, as social norms have not been able to adapt to the changing reality. For instance, failures in terms of regulations, taxation systems, housing conflicts, online sharing biases and negative effects on labour rights have been observed (Malhotra & Alstyne, 2014; Martin, Upham & Budd, 2015). In this sense, the difficulty of setting boundaries that help to differentiate between sharing and commerce activities has been expressed, with the call being made to remain "critical of the contradiction between the culture of sharing amongst users and the commercial ambitions of many platforms on which this sharing takes place" (Stalder & Sützl, 2011, p.2). Others have even discouraged from the establishment of a belief in the so-called culture of

sharing, arguing that especially factors such as cost savings and utility, besides trust and familiarity, play the largest role in the satisfaction of SE users and their likelihood of using a SE option again, with community belonging to play almost no importance, while environmental impact was not found to be relevant at all (Möhlmann, 2015). Even though such findings are not representative, they still offer an interesting insight which is inconsistent with the SE's central ideas of social and environmental sustainability. This finding has been supported by Ikkala & Lampinen who found that in the context of network hospitality, such as in the case of Airbnb, people who monetized their offered property were primarily driven by financial gains (Möhlmann, 2015). However, this monetization, contrary to expectation, did not lead to 'instrumental and calculative sociability'. Instead, the involvement of money provided for a useful frame which supported the hosts' efforts in sociability and their coordination efforts of the exchange process in general, and in fact increased the hosts' interest in sociability (Ikkala & Lampinen, 2015). This, as the authors themselves note, is not to call for the monetization of sharing services, but to take into account its positive effects while remaining critical of its larger effects on society. These findings tie into the larger debate strand on the SE which discusses the influence of the presence of money on the potential and further development of the SE.

It is hence argued that economic vocabularies have established themselves around SE practices and that the SE's streams of altruism and nostalgic power are being influenced by capitalistic workings. It has also been argued that the SE can be situated within the idea of 'info-liberalism', which assimilates neoliberalist capitalism with digital communications (Banning, 2016). Thus, the potential the SE presents for addressing the unsustainability and inequalities of market economies is negated by many, relegating to the observation that goods that are shared have originally been sold, requiring market mechanisms for the first purchase of these goods. In general, it has been found that the SE is based on workings of hybridization, using two value-creating logics: that of a public interest logic, providing benefits to environment and society and that of a private interest logic, using market forces to create revenues (Cohen & Munoz, 2016). In this way, the basis is not laid for real mutual exchange but instead for transactional commerce, rationalizing "the pathologies of the current political and economic system" (Morozov, 2014). Thus, even though resources might be distributed more effectively, environmental benefits appear minimal compared to the actions of large corporations investing in polluting industries such as the exploitation of fossil fuels (Morozov, 2014). The point has also been made that the money saved through engaging in sharing practices can be used for making further purchases, actually stimulating further material acquisition instead of dematerialisation (Ala-Mantila, Ottelin, Heinonen & Junnila, 2016). Cagle has taken an especially critical stance, denoting the SE to mere "neoliberal solutionism" (2014):

*“For the past few years, the ‘sharing economy’ has characterized itself as a revolution: Renting a room on Airbnb or catching an Uber is an act of civil disobedience in the service of a righteous return to human society’s true nature of trust and village-building that will save the planet and our souls. A higher form of enlightened capitalism.”*

## **2.4 Research on sharing economy discourses**

During the process of reviewing the academic debates on the SE, I found that minimal research had been carried out on discursive constructions of the SE. Out of 411 results that had been generated from using the keywords ‘sharing economy’, ‘collaborative consumption’, ‘collaborative economy’, ‘on-demand economy’, ‘access economy’, ‘sharing cities’ and ‘discourse’, only four academic articles were found to be of relevance. Cockayne has identified the contested discourse of sharing to be produced alongside the production of economic practice, with the interrelatedness of language and economic practice contributing to an “emerging affective geography of neoliberalism” (Cockayne, 2016, p.74) and perpetuating the normalization of precarious and unjust working conditions (2016), thus sustaining the rise of the global precariat (Standing, 2011). This is achieved by SE firms and platforms through framings of sharing that naturalize and romanticize precarious work as being ethical, devaluing labor in the process (Cockayne, 2016). Having identified the common framing of the development of the SE as a socio-technical transition, Martin analyses niche actors’ as well as regime actors’ framings of the SE. His findings suggest that while niche actors frame the SE as an opportunity for sustainable and equitable consumption as well as for a sustainable economy, regime actors tend to emphasize its unregulated and incoherent characteristics, as well as its neoliberal function (Martin, 2016). Further, regime actors have been found to put special emphasis on commercialization (Martin, 2016). It has been suggested that this framing of corporate co-option has to be challenged if the SE is envisaged to truly drive a transition towards sustainability (Martin, 2016). When studying discursive constructions of online collaborative consumption platforms, Binninger, Ourahmoune & Robert found that social as well as financial narratives were dominating, while ecological framings were less present (2015). This has implications for consumption practices, for example by enlarging the desire to collaboratively consume to satisfy feelings of community and solidarity, encouraging hyper-consumption, contrary to the concept’s environmental focus (2015). Molz finds that in the context of alternative tourism, free hospitality exchange networks such as Couchsurfing might advocate sharing practices by challenging the for-profit logic of mass tourism, but that at the same time it is important to bear in mind that these networks are based on moral

affordances which employ discourses of guilt, virtue, discipline, pleasure and authenticity (Molz, 2013).

These findings provide first insights into discursive constructions of the SE, but also call for further research. Furthermore, it has been found that particularly SE discourses in the 'Global South' have not been given attention, with calls made for existing research opportunities to more intensively explore SE discourses "across cultures, geographies and economies with contrasting characteristics" (Martin, 2016, p.152). This further justifies my proposed research task of particularly studying the Chinese context for the production of SE discourses.



### **3 The Sharing Economy in the Chinese context**

#### **3.1 China's recent development path and ensuing environmental problems**

Over the last four decades, China has embarked on a development path towards socialist modernisation that has been characterized by rapid economic growth at unprecedented scale. On average, the Chinese economy has showcased growth of annually 10% during the past 30 years (Kuijs & Wang, 2006; Wang, 2013). Market-oriented reforms pushed through, as well as cooperative culture in advancing rural industrialization, the generation of knowledge and human capital as well as the role of local governments at village and township level have provided for the dominant explanation that aided in advancing China's economic development (Lin, Yao, Murray & Cook, 2002). Being portrayed as "one of the great success stories of the last quarter century" (Economy, 2004, p.60) and constantly being reproduced through superlative rhetoric of growth and speed, China's development process towards a market-based economy with 'Chinese characteristics' can be said to display both dynamism and high complexity: It has shown dynamism in the sense of its transition from a socialist to a market economy, being the most rapidly developing economy worldwide (Naughton, 2007). Besides, there are large regional differences in development and industrialization levels: while the rural, predominantly agrarian society is still struggling with poverty and subsistence farming, a transformation towards an urban society has been taking place, with modern information economies especially being generated in China's Eastern coastal megacities (Naughton, 2007; Wang, 2013). The complexity of this transformation becomes clear when looking at the diversity of elements it has involved: tradition and socialism but also modernisation and marketisation. Changes have been taking place regarding various aspects of culture, society and economy, such as for instance institutional restructuring as well as changes in economic and political ideologies (Naughton, 2007).

While some have praised China for pursuing economic growth that the environment can adjust to (Roumasset, Burnett & Wang, 2008), it has become evident that the rapid development over the past decades has taken place at the expense of the environment. An economic development model that relies heavily on investments, exports and high consumption cannot be sustainable in the long run

(Wang, 2013). As a result, natural resource depletion at grand scale has taken place, with the degradation of major production-support systems such as land, water and forests (Naughton, 2008; Niu & Harris, 1996; Shapiro, 2012). Furthermore, this has resulted in pollution and waste management problems threatening central life-support systems such as air and water (Naughton, 2008; Niu & Harris, 1996; Shapiro, 2012; Xu & Zhang, 2007). While environmental pollution causes the highest cost, it has for example been estimated that the national cost of both environmental pollution and resource depletion for the year 2005 accounted for 13,5% of China's GDP (Shi, Ma & Shi, 2011), suggesting that "insufficient attention [has been given] to the environmental impact of industrialization" (Murray & Cook, 2002, p.56). It should also be noted that while the common rhetoric suggests current issues of environmental degradation and pollution are attributable mainly to the period of economic reforms and growth after 1978, the socialist struggle and utopian urgency to overcome nature that defined the Mao era are also of relevance (Economy, 2004; Murray & Cook, 2002; Shapiro, 2001). For instance, the Maoist legacy of population burden as well as devastating environmental degradation is still driving today's urgency which is maintaining unsustainable resource exploitation (Shapiro, 2001). In addition, the post-Mao period left behind feelings of disillusionment, betrayal and unfulfilled promises, with generations of Chinese turning towards the attainment of personal gain through individualism and materialism (Shapiro, 2001).

### **3.2 Domestic as well as international implications of China's environmental problems**

China is now the biggest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions worldwide, and while from a historical perspective its total CO<sub>2</sub> contributions are low (Liu & Raven, 2010; Murray & Cook, 2002), China finds itself in a state of "intense exposure to climate change" (Wang, 2013, p), given that it has the world's largest population with millions of people living in vulnerable ecosystems and many of these below the poverty line (Economy, 2004; Edmonds, 1994; Liu & Raven, 2010). In addition to the environmental degradation and pollution as a result of extensive resource use and consumption, the increasing rate of urbanization has led to growing levels of socioeconomic inequality and a loss of social capital (Huang, Yan & Wu, 2016; Wang, Pan & Zhang, 2013). The growth of a consumer oriented culture and a growing middle class which is forging its identity through the increasing hedonic consumption of products and goods (Lin, 2010; Murray & Cook, 2002; Wang, 2014), is driving the desire to live the lifestyle of China's so-called 'new rich' (*xinfu*) (Gerth, 2011). As the continuous development and growth of new consumer landscapes offering a wide array of consumption experiences is taking shape, a large number of people still remain barred from affording and consuming the basic necessities of life (Cartier, 2009; UN-Habitat, 2016). While during the socialist Mao era, inequality

“was organized more in terms of local variations in organizational affiliation and rank, rather than via differential incomes and property that translated into class differences and purchases and lifestyles” (Whyte, 2012, p.230), the reasons for higher socioeconomic inequalities nowadays lie in the different speeds at which incomes have been rising: the incomes of the better-off are rising much faster than those of the less well-off, with the urban-rural ratio of income currently at round 3:1, aggregated by the socialist remnant of the Hukou system and amongst the highest in the world (Whyte, 2012).

China’s response to the aforementioned problems is of relevance for ensuring domestic sustainable pathways of development in order to avert the effects of climate change through emissions reductions and to protect its ecology and people. Besides, the levels of responsibility taken by the Chinese government will have implications for both its stability and legitimacy (Shapiro, 2012). It can even be said that the severity of the environmental crisis China is facing and the related consequences for its future development will heavily impact on how its national identity will be shaped accordingly (Shapiro, 2012). However, the decisions and actions taken by the Chinese government as well as the Chinese people alike does not only influence China’s wellbeing, but also has wider implications for the rest of the planet, as environmental problems do not halt at state borders, but transgress political and geographical boundaries. In this way, China’s environmental problems carry an international dimension, given the regional and global interdependencies in terms of ecosystem functioning and implications for greenhouse gas-induced climate change experienced worldwide (Liu & Raven, 2010; Shapiro, 2012). Indeed, it is possible to say that there is no other country whose decisions and actions taken for reducing greenhouse gas emissions will greater impact the global community’s efforts in limiting climate-change induced effects than China (Schreurs, 2011; Liu & Raven, 2010).

### **3.3 Resulting relevance of sharing economy principles for the Chinese context**

Given that the SE presents potential for changing the perception of resources and goods, and thus also presents possibilities for addressing sustainability challenges of declining environmental and social conditions such as increasing resource use and declining social equity as well as social capital, it is of relevance to analyse existing discourses on the SE in the Chinese context. Besides, while all world cultures embody the tradition of sharing in various socially established sharing codes (Agyeman, McLaren & Shaefer-Borrego, 2013), certain regions have been found to showcase higher willingness to participate in the SE. According to the GSMA Mobile for Development Foundation, emerging markets show the highest rate of willingness to participate, with the Asia-Pacific region

considerably leading at 78% in comparison to Latin America (70%), the Middle East and Africa (68%), Europe (54%) and North America (52%). Representing the most dynamic and complex economy within the Asia-Pacific region, it will be of special interest to study SE discourses in the Chinese context (GSMA, 2016).

Furthermore, the Chinese government itself, which has been deploying five year national development plans to define and guide the country's economic development since 1953, has been actively including ideas of the SE in its 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for the period 2016-2020: at the so-called 'twin sessions' in late November 2015, the following five development concepts were presented as the new principles guiding the country's economic development over the next five years: innovation, coordination, opening up, green development and *sharing* (Li, 2016). This serves as further impetus to examine SE discourses in the Chinese context.

## **4 Research Methodology and Research Strategy**

### **4.1 Research Methodology**

Discourse can be defined as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). While the detailed study of discourses lies at the core of discourse analysis, this vast field has not arrived at a consensual approach to analyzing language in use (Taylor, 2001). CDA, a variant of discourse analysis, features a variety of theories, methods and approaches, which it unites with the aim of studying the “semiotic dimensions of [...] political-economic or cultural change in society” (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011, p.357).

#### ***4.1.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations***

Fairclough’s particular methodological approach to CDA has been found to be most progressive in terms of acknowledging that discourse is relevant to all social practices, but that this does not reduce social practices to mere semiosis, which stands in contrast to many other approaches to CDA that are not in line with critical realism (Flatschart, 2016). In this sense, Fairclough’s CDA approach is the only approach to discourse analysis that is clearly aligned to critical realism. The originator of critical realism, Roy Bhaskar, committed to the existence of an external reality that is separable from our understandings and explanations of it (Bryman, 2008). This presents the basic tenet of critical realism, which he outlined as the concept of the two dimensions of knowledge: while the intransitive dimension represents the external world structures, world mechanisms and world events that are independent of our making sense of them through knowledge production, transitive objects of knowledge are “the artificial objects fashioned into items of knowledge by the science of the day” (Bhaskar, 1998a, p.16). Such include the establishment of theories, paradigms, models and methods to acquire knowledge about the external world (Bhaskar, 1998a). Thus, a change of transitive objects of knowledge such as the remodeling of theories and models does not imply a following change of what these theories and models are based on. What designates Bhaskar’s philosophy of science from others is his going beyond of acknowledging the mind’s construction of the world, also taking into account the natural world itself (Collier, 1994).

Thus, based on the positioning of my research within the research arena of sustainability science and subscribing to its interdisciplinary core, I have identified the principles of critical realist philosophy to

be the most suitable for underlying my research task. From this stance on human-nature interactions, acknowledging the pre-existence of a material reality that determines human agency, it follows that Fairclough's CDA approach is the most suitable for answering my research questions.

#### ***4.1.2 Fairclough's approach to CDA***

Fairclough regards discourse as a social practice which steps into interplay with social structures. Social structures are understood as relations within society as well as its constitutive institutions that exhibit discursive as well as non-discursive characteristics<sup>1</sup> (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Fairclough proposes that social practices can shape and reproduce social structures and relations but that social practices are also shaped by social structures (Fairclough, Mulderrig & Wodak, 2011; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2009;). This is what defines the dialectical nature of discourse as a social practice with other social dimensions. He notes that this dialectical relationship is often not given enough importance even though it is crucial for understanding how social structures and power relations shape discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

#### ***Theoretical considerations***

Fairclough's CDA approach has a strong basis in theory, relying primarily on grand theories (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). For instance, it lays particular emphasis on studying the use of language as a form of power, drawing on Foucauldian theories (Bryman, 2008). Foucault postulates that discourse is to be understood not simply as the site of manifesting or hiding power and desire, but as power itself: "discourse is the power which is to be seized" (Foucault, 1981, p.53). Further, Fairclough also bases his CDA on a Marxist understanding of social conflict, whose semiotic dimensions can be located in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As such, elements of social practices such as production activities, social relations and cultural values express dialectical relations whose relationship with semiosis can be critically analysed (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Furthermore, Fairclough's CDA approach also draws on Halliday's linguistic theory of systemic functional linguistics which "analyses language as shaped by the social functions it has come to serve" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In this sense, it is understood that discourse can serve multiple functions, constructing social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). At this point it should also be noted that different CDA approaches vary in the extent and intensity to which linguistic analysis is applied. Fairclough's

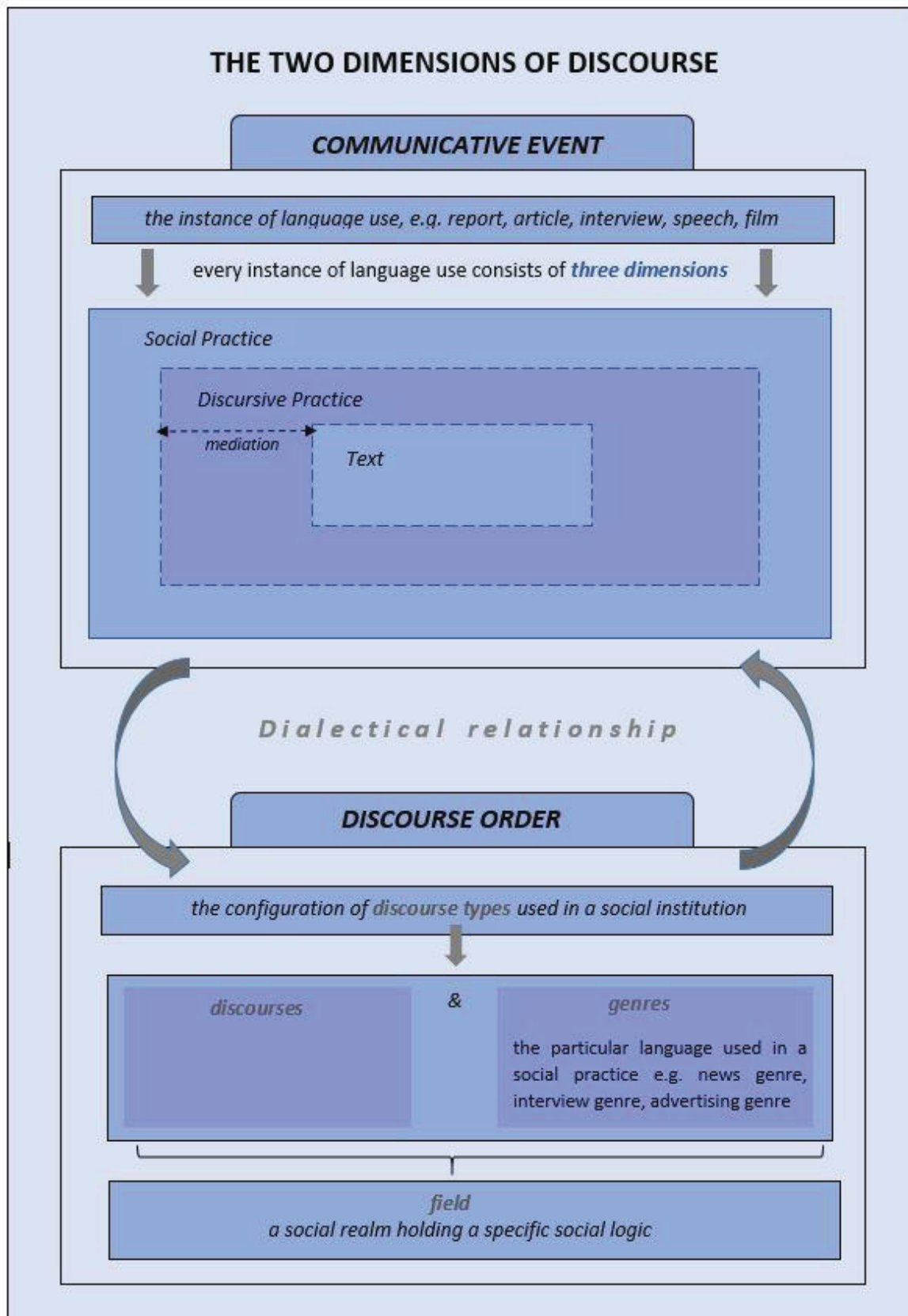
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<sup>1</sup> While discursive practices involve the production and consumption of semiotics, such as language, non-discursive practices account for physical activities (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

dialectical-relational approach takes a “broad linguistic operationalization” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), not going into linguistic depth. Instead, it is emphasized that textual analysis needs to be combined with social analysis.

### ***Methodological tools***

Based on the afore-mentioned philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, Fairclough has developed methodological tools for carrying out a CDA. Most important to consider is his ‘three-dimensional model’ that functions as an analytical framework for analysis. At its core lies the analysis of a communicative event in relation to the discourse order, as exemplified in Figure 1 below. The communicative event is a specific instance in which language is used, such as for example in a speech, interview or film. Thereby, every communicative event is understood to be composed of three different dimensions. That is, the text itself including its linguistic features such as its vocabulary, sentence coherence, grammar etc., as well as the discursive practice which signifies the act of text production or text consumption, and finally the social practice. This first dimension of discourse stands in a dialectical relationship with the second dimension - the order of discourse. Here, we look at the collocation of different discourse types that come to use in a given social institution. Discourse types are understood as made up of discourses and genres. Genres in turn are the specific ways of using language in a particular practice. Fairclough has combined this idea of the discourse order with Bourdieu’s theoretical notion of the field, which implies a social realm holding a specific social set-up (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Within this field, social actors follow different pathways due to different and often conflicting goals being pursued. The ideas of the discourse order and field can be said to determine that which can be said and that which cannot, depending on which social actors emerge as the ultimate defining agents in the process of struggle over power. In this sense, the discourse order can be altered by users of semiotic systems, ultimately reconfiguring the given discourses within a field by “using discourses and genres in new ways or by importing discourses and genres from other orders of discourse” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.72). Especially the latter presents the greatest potential for leading to change (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).



**Figure 1.** The two dimensions of discourse as conceptualized by Fairclough. Own figure based on Fairclough (2001), Fairclough (2009b) and Jorgensen & Phillips (2002).

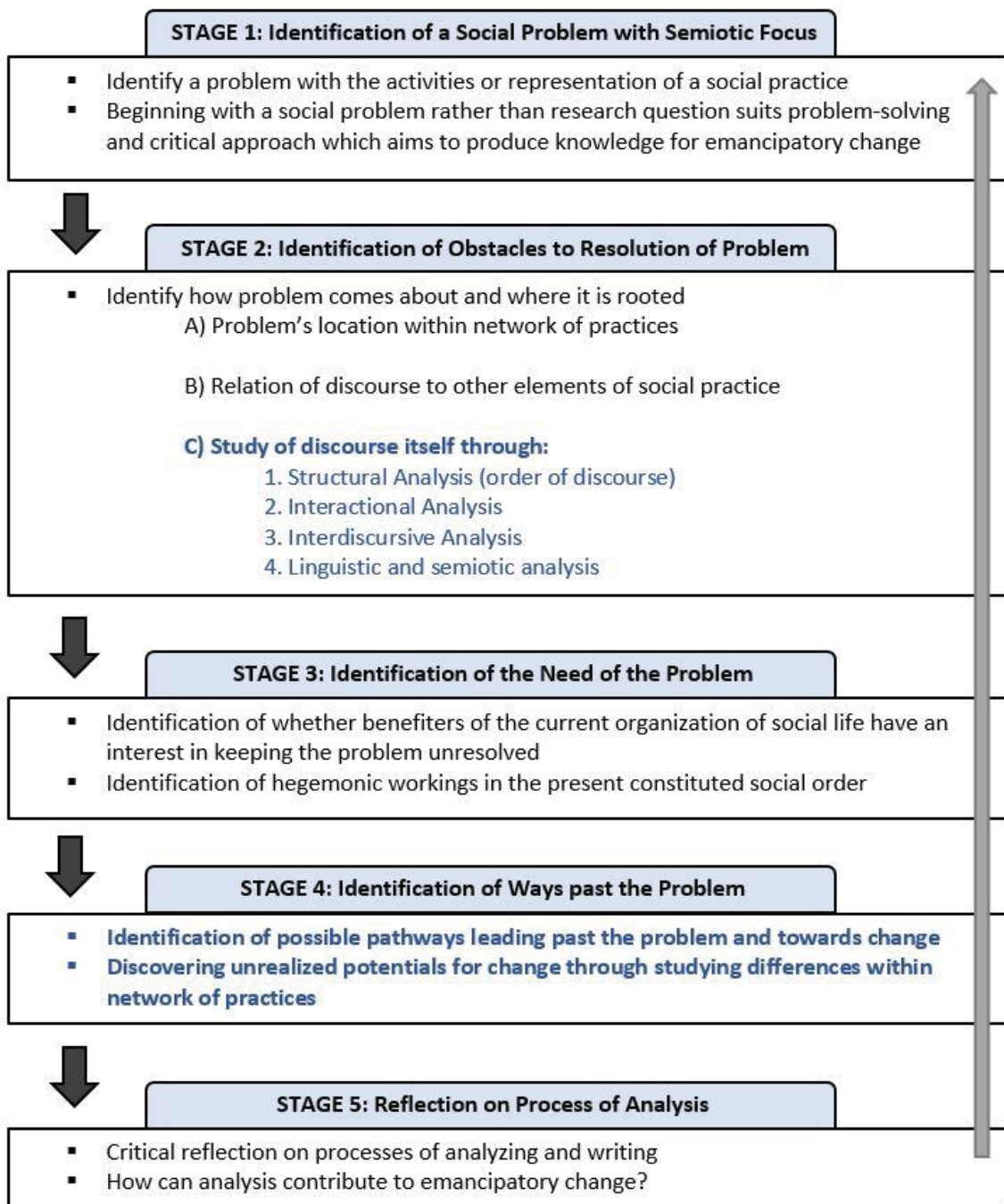


The reconfiguration of the orders of discourse within specific fields presents a conceptual process that is of special relevance to Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach to CDA, referred to as interdiscursivity. This implies the mixing of different discourse types within discursive practices that leads to creative discourse combinations within discourse orders, but also between discourse orders (Fairclough, 2001; Fairclough, 2009b; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Often, these imply progress in terms of inciting and directing towards discursive as well as socio-cultural change (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2009). In contrast, the adhering to conventional discursive mixing is more of an indication of the upholding of dominant discourse orders, enabling discourses orders and therefore social fields to remain more or less static (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2009).

This concept of interdiscursivity inevitably links to that of intertextuality, which locates all communicative events within their historical context and space, emphasizing that communicative events have been generated on the basis of past events but at the same time contribute to defining present historic events (Fairclough, 2009b; Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). This is also to point towards the interrelatedness of textual elements with other textual elements of different historic contexts, resulting in an intertextual chain (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). These conceptual processes can thus all be said to contribute to historical development as well as historical change.

Finally, when looking at how different discourses negotiate and claim power, the conceptions of discourse orders, interdiscursivity and intertextuality need to be linked to Fairclough's understanding of hegemony and ideology. In his understanding, hegemonies are maintained through ideological workings which involve the "naturalization of meanings which sustain relations of power and domination" (Fairclough, 2009b, p.181), whereby "consent rather than coercion" (Fairclough, 2001, p.232) leads to the broad acceptance of certain discourses over others. It is this functioning of ideologies that lies at the core of studying discourse.

As seen below in Figure 2, Fairclough has over the years developed a further framework for analysis. This five-stage framework, which is an extensive step-by-step framework for analysis, positions the analytical concepts from the two dimensions of discourse including the three-dimensional model at Stage 1 and 2, particularly at Stage 2C, while also taking into account wider analytical considerations such as the identification of who needs the problem to persist (Stage 3), the identification of possible pathways past the social problem (Stage 4) as well as reflections on the analysis process itself (Stage 5).



**Figure 2.** Five-stage analytical framework of Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach to CDA, adapted figure from Fairclough (2001, p.236).

## 4.2 Research Strategy

The research strategy should not blindly follow proposed analytical frameworks and tools, but instead cater to each individual research project's direction taken in terms of defined research aims and posed research questions (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Similarly, Fairclough does not advocate for a strict, linear adherence to his proposed analytical tools, but instead suggests taking into account the two dimensions of discourse during analysis as well as to frame the analysis "in something similar to [his five-stage analytical] framework" (Fairclough, 2001, p.236; Fairclough, 2009b). Accordingly, based on my detailed study and examination of Fairclough's CDA methodology, I incorporate the two dimensions of discourse for my analysis, while at the same time touching on all five stages during my analysis, discussion and concluding remarks, albeit not following the specific order proposed by Fairclough.

## 4.3 Research material

As outlined in Figure 3 below, I have selected to critically analyse textual documents from the political, corporate, academic and public social fields, the choice of which will be further outlined in the analysis section.



**Figure 3.** Chosen social fields and respective documents for analysis, own figure.

#### **4.4 Research limitations**

The empirical data that served as the basis for my carried out analysis consisted of textual documents and posts, including one visual element. While I argue that my analysis of already existing texts presents a strength in that it has “[provided] non-reactive data” (Fairclough, 2009, p.28), I acknowledge that my analysis showcases extensive limitations. For instance, a major limitation of my analysis concerns the selection of data. The specific selection criteria of data for each analysed discursive field have been outlined in the respective analysis parts, though what unites them is their non-randomized component. This specific selection of data inherent in conducting a dialectical-relational approach to CDA stands at risk of being criticized for having been ‘cherry-picked’ to prove specific preconceptions the researcher had prior to the analysis (Baker et al., 2008). As a result, the non-randomized way of selecting data has considerable implications for questions of representativeness (Baker et al., 2008). The data I selected represents only specific actors’ discursive practices and cannot be said to represent the wider discursive field within which they are located. For instance, my analysis of the political discourse on the SE was restricted to governmental data. However, the government is only one participant in the political discourse. Other actors that take part in political processes involving discursive elements may for instance include political organizations or political activists, which I did not consider in my analysis. Similarly, social media data cannot be said to represent the entire public discourse. It could have been insightful to have also analysed mass media data as well as to then have studied the mutual effects of their different discourse orders within the public discursive field. This would have presented a stronger basis for findings pertaining to the mutual influences between the different discursive fields analysed.

Inherently tied to these problems of representativeness are questions of generalizability. Given that I analysed a very restricted amount of data, this presents a limitation in that from the findings generated from my analysis of this data, I cannot claim to have located all discourses and ideologies inherent in the framing of the SE in the Chinese context. This is because the small amount of data I have analysed only presents fragments of the existing discursive arguments and ideological framings. In this way, my analysis cannot claim to have revealed systematic patterns of framing the SE in the Chinese context. Adding to this is the fact that my analysis was focused on only four discursive fields, namely the political, corporate, academic and public fields. These do not present the full range of discursive fields that exist, essentially “[simplifying] the plethora of actual voices” (Fairclough, 2009a,

p.319). For instance, I could have included the educational discourse in order to analyse the discourses inherent in the teachings of the SE in educational institutions such as for example universities. On the other hand, it could be argued that I selected to analyse discourses from too large a number of discursive fields and that this has led to a very dense analysis, trying to cover all relevant analytical dimensions on the social, structural, interactional, interdiscursive and linguistic levels. However, I would like to point out at this point that this choice was based on my judgement that including the analysis of these four discursive fields would enable me to answer my research questions 2 and 3, as analyzing discourses from a range of discursive fields makes it easier to showcase the dynamism of discursive practices and how these interact to transform our social reality.

Finally, conducting a CDA often comes with the risk of the research not presenting sufficient “academic rigor” (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). This can be attributed to the fact that the researcher’s analysis and its findings can be heavily influenced by bias through personal world views and subjective conceptions. Consequently, my subjective understandings of what discourse is and how it can be studied through CDA, as well as my broader understandings of sustainability can be said to have affected my analysis, especially with regard to my ethical stance on environmental and social aspects of sustainability. In addition, it needs to be taken note of that CDA is a “Western originated paradigm” (Tian & Chilton, 2014, p.195) and that this possibly requires the adaptation of CDA to the unique characteristics of China’s social and political context, which I have not done for my analysis.

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 The political discourse on the sharing economy in the Chinese context

Critically analyzing political discourse is mainly of relevance as governments are involved in shaping national decision-making and legislation which in turn affects society. Also, studying the discourses produced by political elites can give insights into how these interrelate with the production of discourses by other fields, examining mutual influences (Dijk, 1993). In the context of the SE, studying the political discursive field is of particular relevance as it has been noted that in many countries, SE discourses are predominantly framed in the context of the fields of civil society and corporations, leaving out the possible roles that political agents play in developing, implementing, supporting or resisting the SE (Cohen & Munoz, 2016; Heinrichs, 2013). And yet, governmental bodies can often be regarded as defining entities of a country's development path. Studying the discourses produced by the Chinese government can be said to be of particular interest as China's political system is of a complex, authoritarian nature, with the Communist Party being the sole party of the People's Republic of China determining the relations between the Chinese state and Chinese society (Guo, 2013). This has implications for how environmental, economic and social questions, including those pertaining to the SE, are framed (Shapiro, 2012).

The concept of the SE is for the first time mentioned in the government work report for 2016, and consecutively in the government work report for 2017, hence these documents will serve as the empirical data for analysis of the political discourse. The 'Report on the Work of the Government' was presented by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2016 and 2017 at the Fourth and Fifth Sessions of the Twelfth National People's Congress on behalf of the State Council, the main organ of state administration (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2016). The presentation and publication of the reports on government work take place on an annual basis and mainly serve as a review of the past year's economic and social progress as well as an outline for the plans for the coming year.

In the reports, reference to the SE is made when outlining the guidelines to be followed in attending to China's future development path. In the context of the third guideline (2016), which foresees "[accelerating] the shift in driving forces for development", the SE is *identified* as one such new driving force for development, which essentially textures together the concept of the SE with that of

the Chinese modernisation discourse. It is argued that “[boosting] the development of the sharing economy” by means of creating sharing platforms and bringing about institutional innovations using new, modern technologies will lead to the creation of “strong new engines”. The employed kinesthetic imageries of a driving force and an engine, underlined by verb phrases such as accelerate, build up, move faster, boost and inject vitality, convey a sense of superlative speed and action. These new driving forces, of which the SE forms one, are not only to replace but align to and hence transform old driving forces, forming a “twin engine”. This renewed kinesthetic metaphor goes further to interlock the SE concept into the Chinese modernisation discourse, setting up an interdependent, binary accord. Essentially, this signifies the importing of the SE concept from a discourse order involving environmentalist discourses into a discourse order involving economic modernisation discourses. Here, it is interesting to examine the motives inherent in the reasoning for supporting the “healthy development of emerging industries” such as the SE: efficient resource use would be increased, enabling more people to “take part and benefit” (2016), bringing “greater convenience to [the] people” (2017) – embodying the idea of ‘sustainable prosperity’.

The framing of the SE thus takes place in the context of development being denoted as the top government priority, whose pursuit is “like sailing against the current: you either forge ahead or drift downstream” (2016). For this purpose, the Chinese economy acts “like a gigantic ship, [which] breaks the waves and goes the distance” (2016). The figurative language that is employed here makes use of similes combining notions of journey and natural forces. The journey simile serves to depict development as a path that involves the end goal of leading to a “moderately prosperous society”. Both a positive and a negative possible outcome of this journey are mentioned, serving to convey the urgency with which “forging ahead” through people-centered economic development remains the only option if one does not want to “drift downstream”. The simile of unpredictable natural forces such as water and waves that have to be fought to pursue development serves to emphasize that China finds itself in a position of political and economic transformation and change, in which the SE plays a decisive and supportive role.

The relevance of the discursive framing of the SE in the Chinese political discourse can be reiterated when positioning the analysis with final remarks on the linguistic and discursive practices and features of the analysed government report genre. The government work reports are organized in a cyclical structure: both the opening and closing of the reports address the “deputies” of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, owing to the report’s purpose of publicizing information on past government work and future tasks, open for commenting by the deputies. Regarding whole text language organization, the mood can be said to be of an authoritative



and deterministic nature, with the primacy of the government and the Premier as author easily identifiable. However, the author's authority is not linguistically grounded in an imperative mood as is often the case in the government report genre. Instead of subjects being omitted, active voice is used throughout the document, creating a sense of agency and responsibility, underlined by a frequent use of transitive verbs that imply action taken, such as the modal verb "will". However, the dominating subject is "we", referring to the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and thereby reinforcing its dominance as sole party and responsible actor for guiding the country's development. While this actively forges identity through constructing the social relations between the Chinese Communist Party ("we") and Chinese civil society ("the people"), this is also of relevance when considering the discursive practice of the text: the government members as recipients of the reports on government work internalize the intentionally produced discourses and altered discourse orders. Thus, the government work reports as communicative events shape the ideological framings according to which Chinese government members turn newly internalized discourses, such as that of the SE concept imported into the Chinese discourses on sustainable economic growth, into action.

### ***5.1.1 Excursus into the social matrix and economic condition of the political discursive practices of the sharing economy: Ecological Civilisation***

Within both policy documents, it is possible to see the intertextual drawing on China's historic change in policy direction, which has become apparent through its incorporation of an environmental rhetoric in its national planning documents. This has been expressed through the construct of ecological civilization, which was first formulated around the year 2007 in terms of the setting up of an environmental evaluation system incorporating factors such as "resource consumption, environmental damage and ecological efficiency" (Meng, 2012, para.20). While this environmental rhetoric has been questioned by some, others have argued that China's changing position in national development enabled it to economically take action for sustainable development, as it had actively started to address in its national economic and social planning in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plans (Lam, 2008; Parr & Henry, 2016). Hence, the discourse on ecological civilization emerged more strongly around 2011, but was formally given weight in 2015 with the publishing of a state policy document entitled 'Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Further Promoting the Development of Ecological Civilisation'. It proposes the transforming of "green development into new comprehensive national strength" (Brahm et al., 2015,



p.20), ultimately reflecting on conventional understandings of economic growth that had dominated until that point and rebalancing these with environmental thought.

However, it is only in the formulation of the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan for the time period 2016-2020 that a clear stance is taken on the environmental direction followed. In fact, its very core can be said to lie in the construct of ecological civilization (Li, n.d.). Concretely, the construct of ecological civilization puts forward a redefinition of economic growth towards a more green understanding of growth, promoting the 'harmony between man and nature' (National Development and Reform Commission of the People's Republic of China, 2016; Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, 2016). This represents a divergence from the period of industrial civilization, which China had embarked on during the late 1970s and which lasted to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Parr & Henry, 2016). In contrast, the discourse on ecological civilization promotes a "final break with the 'pollute first, clean up later' policies in the recent past" (Gaell, 2016a), which it mainly aims to achieve through reforming its governance system and mechanisms (Gaell, 2016c). For instance, it has put forward ambitious goals of bridging the gap between environmental regulations articulated in government policies and implementation at the local level. Concrete propositions include the revision of existing environmental laws and the setting of 'ecological red lines', comparable to the planetary boundaries (Gaell, 2016b), but most importantly changes in the set-up of government official performance assessments such as accountability systems (Gaell, 2016a). Further, the importance of public participation, such as that of non-governmental organisations is highlighted (Gaell, 2016a). These proposed measures would represent the following of a 'five-in-one model', in which economic, social and ecological factors are taken into account, complemented by the political and cultural dimensions of behaviour change of public officials as well as civil society, as outlined above (UNEP, 2015; UNEP, 2016). The ecological civilisation (EC) construct can thus be regarded as the larger sustainable development framework, within which to position the emerging SE discourse. As such, the construct of EC represents a transition from a development model working towards economic prosperity to one working towards so-called sustainable prosperity. The concept of the SE can thus be seen to be employed to further the expansion of the ecological civilization discourse in the context of a restructuring of the economy from an investment-led to a consumption-led sustainable growth model.

## 5.2 The corporate discourse on the sharing economy in the Chinese context

The corporate production of discourses is important to examine as corporate elites, through exercising market ideologies, hold large economic and financial control to shape how political, social and environmental matters are discursively framed as well as executed in their own interests (Dijk, 1993). The corporate discursive practice herewith examined is the production of a report by the World Economic Forum (WEF). While the WEF officially portrays itself as a not-for-profit foundation that is “committed to improving the state of the world” without being “tied to any special interests” (WEF, 2017), it can rather be situated within the corporate discursive field. Even though it is not a corporation as such, it can be regarded as a transnational planning body with corporate characteristics due to a large proportion of its members being comprised of the CEOs of the world’s largest transnational corporations (Robinson & Harris, 2000). Together with a range of political leaders, these can be argued to form an economic and political elite through enforcing their separation from the public sphere (Graz, 2003). Essentially, the WEF has actively promoted and through its reproduction contributed to naturalizing discourses of globalization as the process through which economies should become liberated marketplaces (Fougnier, 2008).

The main aim of the produced paper entitled ‘Understanding the Sharing Economy’ is to promote the SE through providing evidence for effective adoption of the SE, relating this to the Chinese case. Hence, the mood is of an argumentative nature, corresponding to its stated aim of “[shaping] national policy approaches” (WEF, 2016, p.3). This is in line with the WEF’s general manipulative attempts at subjecting national governments to its neoliberal discourse of marketisation (Fougnier, 2008). At the same time, it becomes apparent that there is strong intertextual drawing on China’s national economic and social plans. Direct reference is made to the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan and its setting in motion of an economic restructuring, which is superlatively portrayed as one of four “mega trends” to creating an ideal breeding ground for adopting the SE in the Chinese context. This identified trend is repeatedly drawn on, with a clear reproduction of the Chinese government’s rhetoric of historical economic and social changes taking place. In fact, several keywords from the national economic plans such as “drivers” and “engine” are appropriated, reproducing the kinesthetic imagery employed by Chinese state bodies to signal economic changes. Further, it is possible to identify an objectification of an “increasingly urbanized group of consumers” (WEF, 2016, p.3) to being the “engine of growth”. Chinese citizens’ agency is thus reduced to one of mere marketized consumption, impinging assumptions of consumerist social values. Here, interdiscursive blending of the consumerist discourse with the urbanization discourse can be located, enforced through drawing on the policy genre and the direct intertextual quoting of the Chinese Premier Li

Keqiang on urbanization being the main enabler of domestic consumption. The second identified trend to providing the conditions for a SE to develop in the Chinese context is that of material efficiency. Here, a furthering of the consumerist discourse can be identified. The SE is described as representing a new model of consumption, while the role of changes in production are not mentioned. Rather, products are referred to in context of being used more intensely to avert their “sitting” idly. This personification serves as emphasis on maximization and increased product use instead of a focus on products being re-used, and thus furthers the argumentation for consumption growth without increased resource need. However, this view of sustainable development through decoupling of economic growth from resource use and environmental impacts is based on rather weak assumptions. For instance, it has been found that “optimistic efficiency projections often fail to factor in the likelihood of diminishing returns over time” (Alexander, Rutherford & Floyd, 2017, p.15) and that rebound effects where efficiency improvements lead to overall resource increase are largely ignored (Alexander, Rutherford & Floyd, 2017). The reproduction of this reformist view has the effect of sustaining belief in the possibility of sustainable development against a neoliberal economy background (Fletcher & Rammelt, 2017).

The third trend provided to supporting the development of a SE in the Chinese context is that of technological change. Here, a listing of supportive technologies takes places, with examples cited in the form of nominalizations such as “arrival of connectivity”, “proliferation of smart devices” and “collection and analysis of big data”, merely contributing to the enforcement of the WEF’s identity as an elite body promoting reformist sustainable development. The last trend stated is that of high-speed domestic adoption. Adhering to its afore-going numerical focus through listing, the case is made for the exponential growth of the SE in the Chinese context through its valuation in monetary terms. It is stated that the SE was worth \$229 billion dollars in 2015 and that it will see an annual growth rate of 40% over the next five years (WEF, 2016). This marketized language can be intertextually linked to the State Information Center of China, which published these figures in a general report on the state of the SE in 2016 (State Information Center, 2016). With respect to transitivity, a passivization of the SE can be noted, with delivering agency given to the technologies presented. This can be said to further reflect the neoliberal marketisation of the WEF’s sustainability discourse.

At this point it should be noted that the discourses inherent in the textual semiotic system presented above are at interplay with several images included in the paper. As Fairclough has noted, discourse “encompasses not only written and spoken language but also visual images” (Jorgensen & Phillips,

2002). Thus, significant to highlight is the image seen below in Figure 3, which visually complements the text presented.



**Figure 4.** Image included in the introduction of the WEF's report on 'Understanding the sharing economy' (WEF, 2016).

As can be seen in the image, the central components of the image are a spherical ball, positioned on an arrow that points towards the capitalized word "trend". The dominating colours are red and gold, alluding to the Chinese symbolism of colours (Cooper, 2016). The ball thus represents China, with its red colour signifying the Chinese' state's nationalism. When taking note of the compass to be found underneath the spherical red ball, it becomes apparent that China is positioned within the geographical center, referring to its historical tendency of viewing itself as the Middle Kingdom at the centre of the world (Gernet, 1979). This functions to assert the Chinese state's central role of domination in economic and social matters, while the golden arrow symbolically denotes wealth. The capitalization of the keyword "trend" reinforces the four trends identified as driving the SE in China. Thus, the overall workings within the image function to underline the consumer and market discourses reproduced within the text.

### **5.3 The academic discourse on the sharing economy in the Chinese context**

Academic discourses manifest themselves within the discursive as well as linguistic practices within the larger social practice of universities and research institutions (Galatanu, 2009). Examining these academic discourses is of relevance as scientific practices in academia can exert influence on how

political, corporate, social as well as other academic affairs are managed. For instance, the formulation of philosophies and theories through scholarly scientific activities can impact the very foundations of behavioural decisions in the long-run, which has implications for larger societal structural change (Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2009a). In this way, academic discursive practices often make up for an important part of the discursive dimensions of the social practices of problem-solving (Pogner, 2005).

The academic discursive practices I examine here are the English-language academic text productions on the SE in the Chinese context to date. In particular, discursive practices involving the academic article genre are in focus. The journal articles were found via the Scopus database, applying a search of the keywords 'sharing economy' and 'China'. This generated only three relevant journal articles that will be examined in terms of their thematic strands of knowledge production. Given that the academic article genre follows given rules of publishing and requires certain standardized terminology, linguistic features will not be elaborated on. However, it can briefly be said that this genre is characterized by specialist diction which contributes to the formal academic identity that is typical of the academic discourse. Further, the genre displays intentions of interacting with knowledge produced within the same discursive field as well as other discursive fields. As such, its attempts at positioning itself within these fields can be traced in the presence of polyphonic voicing (Flottum, 2009). This entails the presence of the 'self', for example through high modality to its own knowledge claims and first-person manifestations through the pronoun 'I' and 'we', as well as the presence of the 'other' through bibliographical references and in-text citations (Flottum, 2009).

Out of the three papers analysed, one paper situates the SE within sustainability discourses pertaining to environmental and social aspects of sustainability. In their study published in the journal 'Habitat International', which is dedicated to the study of urban and rural issues, Karki & Tao (2016) analyse the accessibility and convenience of public bicycle sharing programs in the city of Suzhou, China. They regard public bike sharing as a viable form of sustainable, low carbon transport in the face of increasing automobile use and ensuing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. For this reason, their study aims at investigating the accessibility and convenience of such public bike sharing schemes for 'weaker' societal groups, essentially contributing to studying the dispersion potential of SE options. They come to the conclusion that top-down approaches to city planning contribute heavily to the inconvenience and inaccessibility of public bike sharing programs for people with lower levels of income and education, impacting this dispersion potential of SE options to the wider public. Suggestions pertaining to the need of bottom-up participatory planning practices are made. Regarding the

authors' positioning within discursive fields, the presence of the 'other' can be localized in references mostly made to the academic fields of transportation, planning and medicine.

The two remaining academic papers can both be said to situate the SE within business and marketing discourses. Published by the International Federation for Information Processing, an organisation linking scientists from academia and industry to study the relationship between informatics and society, Gao's & Zhang's (2016) research aims at achieving a better understanding of SE business models in China by analysing the car-sharing service of Uber China. They particularly explore the involvement as well as relatedness of its actors, criteria leading to business success, profit making processes as well as value offers provided to costumers. While the environmental benefits of reduced carbon emissions are recognized, the research largely draws on business discourses to identify key elements of value creation in Uber China's business model, showing that SE business success is built on the involvement and helpfulness of actors. Further questions of reductions in environmental resource use and social equity are not explored. Instead, the authors' referencing points towards an interaction with academic discursive fields of business, commerce and information systems.

Yang, Song, Chen & Xia (2017) take a more consumer-oriented angle, investigating which relational benefits drive customers of SE services to remain loyal to the offered services. The findings they arrive at indicate that the customer-service provider relationship is most likely to be sustained through safety and social benefits for the customer, with confidence benefits playing a smaller role, while special treatment benefits have no effect on customer loyalty. These findings were deemed useful to further relationship marketing strategies that could potentially boost business for SE service providers. In line with the *Journal of Services Marketing* which this study was published in and its purpose of knowledge production for the best ways of how to serve markets, strongly employed marketing discourses were identified. Through referencing, the authors interacted especially with academic discourse fields of marketing-, business- and consumer research.

#### **5.4 The Public Discourse on the Sharing Economy in the Chinese context**

Public discourse manifests itself within the public sphere, which can be understood as a realm within which unrestricted communication between private individuals takes place (Habermas, 1974). The means by which public discourses can be produced and consumed include media (Habermas, 1974). Discourses within the media can exert special influence in that they are capable of taking a "mediating and sometimes reinforcing [function]" (Dijk, 1993, p.241) to increase the discursive

influence of other social powers. At the same time, their production of discourse provides for frameworks that guide the interpretation and understanding by other social actors (Dijk, 1993). This implies that going beyond the role of mediation, the media to some degree also has the power to take control of other social powers' discursive framings. Besides traditional media, the rapid expansion of social media has been recognized as an important source of such societal reproductive power of everyday discourse (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). It distinguishes itself from other forms of media through "a high level of interactivity, the importance of identity formation and an openness to share content across developing communities" (Lipschultz, 2015, p.5) enabled through online technologies. This expansion also has implications for discursive practices in that information is not merely consumed, but can be produced "through mass-interaction from the bottom-up" (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016, p.134). With the active promotion and building of an Internet infrastructure by the Chinese government in the 1990s, China has also experienced the rapid growth of new media (Shirk, 2011; Gang & Bandurski, 2011). This has stimulated debates as to whether such processes of the development of Chinese civil society have led to the steady erosion of state party control or whether they have further enhanced attempts at control and censorship (Gang & Bandurski, 2011; Geall, 2013). Regardless of this debate, it has been acknowledged that the Internet has acted and is continuing to act as a force of change and social diversification, not least in the setting up of a 'citizens' discourse space' (*huayu kongjian*) (Yang, 2009; Herold, 2011). Studying the discursive reproduction and interaction processes in this discourse space can give important insights into how the SE is being framed in the Chinese public sphere. For this reason, I have analysed a small set of social forum posts in the Chinese social forum 'Zhihu'. I have specifically selected this forum for analysis, as it relies on a question-answer set-up which focuses not only on the mere sharing of information but on the active discussion and reflection of issues of wider societal relevance (Wong, 2014). A keyword search of 'sharing economy' (*gongxiang jingji* and *fenxiang jingji*) generated a total 1131 threads, of which I analyzed all threads that had been upvoted/endorsed by forum users. This resulted in the analysis of 62 forum threads (Zhihu, 2017).

A large majority of forum users discursively engaged in the defining of the SE concept itself, discussing issues pertaining to definitions, boundaries, advantages and disadvantages of the SE concept. On the one hand, the SE is largely framed in terms of the potentials it represents for the environmental aspect of sustainability, with increases in resource efficiency, resource conservation and environmental protection frequently highlighted. As for the social aspects of sustainability, the SE was framed as promoting societal well-being, cooperative relationships, fairness and trust, with young consumers often identified as the innovative driving force behind the SE. In intertextual terms, a large awareness could be found amongst users in that the SE could be located within historical



processes of political change, with several users referring to key state party documents advancing the SE.

However, more users called into question the advantages the SE is claimed to present for environmental and social aspects of sustainability. Several users discursively reframed the SE into actually being a rental economy, negating several companies' SE images by laying emphasis on the mere rental activities carried out. A company whose SE principles were especially often called into question was 'Didi Chuxing', a Chinese company offering a range of car-sharing and car-rental options through providing a mobile transportation platform while presenting itself to work on solving "the world's transportation, environmental and employment challenges" (Didi Chuxing, 2017). It was noted by several users that the functioning of these companies on a "fake" image of the SE was often promoted and enforced by the mass media. Several companies were thus framed by users as driving and sharpening business competition, creating new market monopolies and thus stimulating increased resource use, using the environmental argument of resource conservation and increased usage frequency as a mere 'selling point'. In fact, one of the major principles promoted by the SE that was questioned by several users was that of environmental resource conservation. One user remarked that "as far as conserving natural resources and increasing the resource usage rate is concerned, I fear that this is nothing more than a beautiful fairy tale" (own translation). The usage of the modal particle 罢了 (*ba le* – 'that's all, nothing else') at the end of the user's sentence serves to underline the user's declarative stance. In this sense, many users framed the SE to entail at its core elements and driving mechanisms of the generation of fees and profit, with other elements, such as environmental considerations, only emerging alongside, essentially rendering the SE to simply be "a means to achieve the goal of a capitalist society". A few users related this framing to the government's policy changes towards promoting SE platforms in order to stimulate economic growth. One relevant linguistic observation made was that in the context of critiquing economic growth concepts, a large number of discursive statements made by the users when speaking of the marketized sides of the SE indicated high modality through the usage of adverbs such as 实际上 (*shijishang* – 'as a matter of fact'). Finally, a further significant discursive framing of the SE was that of geographically situating it as coming from outside of China, with international SE companies framed as intruders jeopardizing local administrative systems, not adhering to the Chinese way of 入乡随俗 (*ru xiang sui su* - adapting to local conditions).



## 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Identification of the social problem and the obstacles to overcoming the social problem

The aim of my analysis was to find out how the SE is being discursively framed in the Chinese context in order to determine whether the foundations for realizing the potential that the SE presents for environmental as well as social aspects of sustainability are being laid in China. Following, I will answer research question 2 and sub-research questions 2.a and 2.b through outlining the findings of my analysis.

I found that within the political discursive field, the Chinese state identified the SE to present a major driving force for the reaching of its goal of establishing a 'moderately well-off society', which has formally been anchored as one of the country's main targets in its 13<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. This national economic and social development plan for the years 2016-2020 is based on the idea of EC, which the Chinese state has started to actively promote as its national sustainable development framework. Thus, the functionality of the construction of the SE discourse can be said to be the supporting and advancement of the Chinese state's employed EC construct to continue guiding China's envisioned future modernisation path.

The problem inherent to this finding is that the construct of EC is based on green development discourses (Wang, 2016). Even though these can be argued to raise the general awareness about environmental matters, they are rather positioned to belong to conservative (business-as-usual) and reformist, rather than transformative approaches to sustainable development (Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien, 2005). These generally acknowledge that changes regarding policy formulation and lifestyle are needed, however the changes are envisioned to take place within the current economic and political system (Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien, 2005). Instead of the remodeling of the working features and conditions of the current system, a focus is laid on using scientific-, information- and technological advancements to support resource efficiency increases and renewable technologies (Hopwood, Mellor & O'Brien, 2005). In this way, the transformative potential the SE concept presents for environmental and social aspects of sustainability cannot be said to be realized by the Chinese state, but rather to be used to advance economic growth discourses in a 'greened' manner: resource efficiency is presented as an opportunity "to do more with less" (CCCIED, 2015), bringing 'sustainable prosperity' to the Chinese population.

Further, it became clear throughout the analysis that from an interactional point of view, the discourses produced and reproduced by various societal actors and in different discursive fields examine mutually influential flows between each other (Fairclough, 2009a). For instance, I found that the newly established discourse order of the SE discourse functioning to support the green development discourse of EC, remained unchallenged by the WEF. This can be understood as one strategic way the WEF is aiming to secure its importance as a corporately functioning actor in national and international politics.

While the academic discourse did not showcase direct maintaining of the new discursive mix of SE and EC, it can nonetheless be drawn from the analysis that it contributes to this discursive mix remaining unchallenged. On the one hand, this is due to the very limited amount of research produced within the academic discursive field, constituting an academic silence in the research field of SE discourses in the Chinese context. On the other hand, out of the research that has been produced, only one academic piece was identified to challenge the interdiscursive mix by situating the SE within its transformative potential for environmental aspects of sustainability. The two remaining academic pieces, in contrast, recontextualized the SE in the fields of marketing and business, which can be argued to have supportive qualities for the interdiscursive mix of SE and EC in that they advance discourses on economic growth through consumption and profit.

These results do not, however, indicate that discursive reconstructions merely act to be imposed upon different passivized societal actors within other discursive fields (Cockayne, 2016). While it does hold true that China's approach to environmental public policy making employs authoritarian environmentalist approaches to limit the participation of other societal actors such as scientists or citizens (Gilley, 2012; Shapiro, 2012), the rapid emergence of the Internet as a citizen's online discursive space has challenged this authoritarianism, with no other comparable space enabling the extent of discussion of public affairs as seen online (Yang, 2009). Thus, my findings show that the SE discourse present in the social forum I analysed showcased high levels of interdiscursivity. According to Fairclough, high levels of interdiscursivity within discourse point towards processes that involve change, while low levels of interdiscursivity merely indicate processes of reproduction of the incumbent order (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). I found the discursive practices within the discursive field of social media to be the only ones demonstrating relatively moderate to high levels of interdiscursivity through drawing on the SE concept from a variety of critical, alternative discourses, such as environmental and societal discourses. At the same time, the reproduction of the SE discourse in the context of discourses of modernisation and economic growth was also present. This reflects the dual character of the social media discursive field in producing alternative discourses

through an increasing societal concern about issues of environmental and social relevance (Naughton, 2007; Lam, 2008), but also amplifying existing hegemonic ones.

## 7 Contributions to addressing sustainability challenges and concluding remarks

CDA aims to make visible the role that discursive practices play in shaping, maintaining and transforming the social world (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2003). This entails that the findings constructed through CDA contribute to shaping a new reality (Tian & Chilton, 2014). Given that my analysis faced several extensive limitations, I cannot make the full claim that the academic footprint of my findings shapes a new reality. However, with my research findings, I have been able to contribute to critical language awareness about a range of discursive practices functioning as social practice that are semiotically-, specifically textually-activated. Most importantly, I have shown that political discursive constructions of the SE in the Chinese context do not contribute to the transformative potential the SE presents for environmental and social aspects of sustainability, but instead are utilized to uphold and advance the reformist construct of EC to guide China's future development path in a growth- and consumption-oriented way. This was shown to have been maintained by the corporate discursive field, as well as partly maintained by the academic discursive field, while partly having been challenged by the discursive field of social media. These findings showcase the importance of fostering critical language awareness practices to identify constraining forces on discursive constructions and "possibilities for resistance and change" (Jorgensen & Phillips, p.88). As Belk (2014a, p.7) has noted, we need to be aware that:

*"Sharing is used for different social practices with different functions and different motivations. It is used for a multitude of social and ethical realities. There is a danger of conflating different social qualities of sharing which in turn may produce distortions, illusions and delusions"*

In the Chinese context, the identification of such constraining forces on discursive constructions is of special relevance as "China's development poses the greatest ever environmental challenge for the modern world in terms of speed, size and scarcity" (Ho, 2006, p.3). Thus, it is of importance to locate discursive struggles that employ discourses for functionality in driving certain socio-political transformations over others, such as the employing of the SE discourse for functionality in driving the socio-political transformation of ecological civilisation, based on the reformist green development approach.

In order to counter the power structures underlying discursively produced distortions, resistance can be exercised. I suggest that the lack of academic research exploring the interdiscursive mix of the SE and EC can be countered by producing new discourse orders. Sustainability science research in particular could combine the academic article genre with transformative environmentalist discourses, in this way undermining the marketing discourses inherent in current research on the SE in the Chinese context. This especially holds potential in China, as it is among the five countries identified to produce the largest research output in sustainability science, in fact having experienced the highest growth rates regarding research output in the field, with the amount of publications having more than doubled between 2009 and 2013 (Elsevier, 2015).

Finally, in line with my thesis being situated within the use-inspired field of sustainability science and its “commitment to move [generated] knowledge into societal action” (Kates, 2011), it should be considered how my research findings “can be best fed back into society” (Taylor, 2001, p.324). One such possibility presents the thesis defense following the submission of the thesis, as it is a communicative event that is open to the public. In this way, my research findings could be argued to also have the possibility to reach outside of academia.

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