UNIWERSYTET MARII CURIE-SKŁODOWSKIEJ W LUBLINIE
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PhD Dissertation Review
Author: Hongfei Gu
„Heterogeneity and Asymmetry:
Dimensions of China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe"
Łódź 2018, ss. 269

1. General description

The thesis consists of five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The objectives were clearly defined (p. 13) as "*to examine contemporary relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe. It assesses China's approach to Central and Eastern Europe through the 16+1 Cooperation Mechanism. It traces the evolution of the mechanism, from its predecessor to its most resent development (...)*". The rich part is appendix (more than 20 pages) and the bibliography. The thesis is written on 269 pages all together. The introduction and conclusion of the thesis were well organized.

The structure of thesis conforms rather well to the principles and requirements of the structure of scientific theses. The identification of chapter numbers and titles record are obscure. It also not clear whether the author divided his thesis only into chapters only when he wrote in the introduction about three parts (p.35-36). Some chapter titles are too journalistic.

The author has studied and quoted an appropriate number of bibliographic sources in the thesis. It is the evidence of good knowledge and good orientation to the problem discussed in the thesis.

The word processing of the thesis is adequate. The use of different fonts and structure of the text is proper and helps the reader to better orientation to the text.

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The author used the Harvard referencing system; however, he never gives the page numbers, something that is essential when e.g. directly quoting from another source. Mr. Hongfei Gu sometimes neglected to include the initials of the authors in the in-text citation indicate different people e.g. Song, 2018 (p. 122). There are also some authors quoted in the in-text, but not identified in the bibliography.

Each chapter begins with an introduction and ends with a summary.

The thesis fulfils the formal requests on a satisfactory level.

2. The topicality and validity of the thesis

The chosen subject is valid and topical. The so-called "16+1 cooperation" between China and sixteen Central and Eastern European countries (some of them are members of the EU, others only candidates for membership) began in 2012. In the last seven years, 16+1 has developed into a European bridgehead and the great strategic project of China's New Silk Road (Belt and Road). The author focused on large imbalances in trade and the deficit between Central and Eastern European countries and China. For most countries in the region, China is definitely not among the ten most important export partners, while Beijing established a visible position in their import rankings. Some argue that the 16+1 initiative is a Chinese effort to divide Europe for Beijing's own purposes. There is no doubt that we can talk about heterogeneity and asymmetry in Chinese and CEE relations.

The topic of thesis is current and relevant in the context of up-to-date research in political science.

3. Aims and methods of the thesis

The aims and methods are identified in the introduction as are the research questions and hypothesis. The author correctly formulated the research tasks and

set four hypotheses. He declared and used qualitative (case study) and quantitative methods. However, the author sometimes mixed methods with techniques and did not identify them correctly, e.g. case study is method not technique (p. 27). There was no clear assumption of a theoretical approach. We can find some references to game theory, rational choice theory, the theory of coalitions (in the triad or tetrad), theory of public goods and even constructivism.

In first chapter the author analyses the dynamics of Chinese and CEE relations started from 1949. We can see that from the beginning they were rather asymmetrical. However, what was missing is the author's definition of Central and Eastern Europe. We can find it in next chapter (p. 63), but without deep analysis of this concept. In chapter two the author has focused on heterogeneity of Central and Eastern European countries. This has roots in history, but the author only touches this slightly, which makes his analysis simplistic. It is also not clear what the aim of this chapter is. Whole chapter is rather chaotic. It is also not clear how the author defined public good. The theory of public goods was postulated by Paul Samuelson (1954). It states that goods that are collectively consumed are non-rival and non-excludable. However, the author stressed that "most public goods are exclusive" (p.73). It is interesting how the author viewed the role of the China – CEE Investment Cooperation Found in suppling public goods? It also interesting why in his view the European Structural and Investment Funds are external constraints to ensure China CEE Found inclusiveness? The author used a lot of data in this chapter, however, without adding sources.

The chapter three analysis the bilateral asymmetrical relations under 16+1 mechanism and includes the verification of the author's second hypothesis. He examined the economic and political dimensions of China's CEE relations. The analysis has been enriched by number of figures and tables. Again, the author used much data in this chapter but often without adding sources. He used formulas, i.e., the trade combination degree (p. 109) and another one on p.114, that were helpful for the analysis of asymmetrical economic relations, but it is not clear whether they are his own proposition, or he used formulas proposed by others. The author

underlined the importance of Chinese market to Central and Eastern European countries, especially after the global financial crisis, however, the data he used are from 2007-2016, not before the crisis so how it is possible to compare the situation before and after crisis to prove his thesis of the importance of the Chinese market to CEE countries. The author used quantitative methods and data from Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone (GDELT) and UN Assembly votes as indicators to analyses political relations between China and CEE countries. This analysis shows disparities in views of China in various CEE countries.

The next chapter focused on China's CEE relations from a broad perspective. The author applies game theory and theory of coalition here. He focused on strategic triangles and combine triads (p.139) including U.S., Russia and the entire EU as different sides of the triangles. The author also proposed his own visualization of multi-trilateral relations. It is shame that he did not clearly adopt this theory to his further analysis. By the way Romania and Bulgaria followed the U.S. and NATO in the Libyan war.

The fifth chapter contains analysis of cooperation on the local level. The author researched the international activities of the sub-state regions (para-diplomacy) and took cooperation between Sichuan Province and Łódź as a case study.

At the end of dissertation, the general conclusions of the completed research were described. The conclusions confirm that the declared objective of the work was successfully finished.

There are several mistakes or ambiguities which occurred to me. I already mentioned some and there are others, such as:

1. p. 65 – "believe in Islam" – which is not appropriate remark
2. p. 96 – "CEE countries are not a strategic entity" – what does it mean?
3. p. 96 – "asymmetric sustainable - there is contradiction – how to achieve asymmetrical sustainability?"
4. p. 99 – "it is undeniable that cooperation itself brings conflict..." - how it is possible?

5. p. 162 - there are still 28 EU members countries not 27 as the author indicated.

There are also some remarks which occurred to me and need to be explained in more details:

1. How author views the role of the China – CEE Investment Cooperation Found in suppling public goods in CEE countries? And why in his view are European Structural and Investment Funds are external constrains to ensure China CEE Found inclusiveness?
2. How does the author understand "back to the future" in terms of China CEE relations?
3. Should China's engagement with Central and Eastern Europe be examined within the broader context of its strategy towards Europe? If yes how? What are consequences?

To sum up, despite several critical remarks, I would like to emphasize that the topic discussed in the thesis is extremely current, and therefore has a high cognitive value. In my opinion, the reviewed thesis fulfills requirements posed on theses aimed for obtaining a PhD degree. This thesis is ready to be defended orally, in front of respective committee by the statutes in the Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland.

Lublin, January 29th 2019