

The Development of Sino-Serbian Relations under the Belt and Road Initiative: Forging the ‘Iron Friendship’

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In recent years, Serbia has seemingly been standing out as the leading partner of China in Central and Eastern Europe, and even – relatively speaking – a significant one on a global scale. The two countries state that they share a close and long-standing friendship, which is regularly mentioned in the context of joint ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ projects that are actively being implemented or planned. However, this narrative seems to have emerged – or at least significantly intensified – only after the start of a closer economic cooperation. This paper analyzes the said change in discourse, aiming to establish when it occurred and how far its reach is, with the goal of using the answers to these research questions as a basis for understanding the underlying governing mechanisms. The hypotheses put forward are that the discourse on Sino-Serbian cultural ties emphasizing the idea of a close and long-standing friendship started only after an increase in the political and economic cooperation, and that it is only or mostly present in the official discourse on the two countries’ cooperation. As such, the narrative on Sino-Serbian cultural ties can be explained as an example of the top-down governance of culture, which is in line with the theory on cultural diversity. Tracing the development of Sino-Serbian relations through empirical data, it is shown that the narrative on close cultural ties indeed intensified with an increase in economic cooperation and that the notion of a deep friendship between the two countries has been actively managed since the start of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. The so-called ‘iron friendship’ between the two countries is revealed to be less a deeply-rooted historical reality and more an example of consciously forging a narrative with the purpose of facilitating bilateral cooperation.

Keywords: China, Serbia, Belt and Road Initiative, cultural diversity, iron friendship, Western Balkans

Situating the ‘Iron Friendship’

The recent 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China (hereinafter China) was marked by many events celebrating its founding, but the gala in Serbia’s capital resembled more a celebration of bilateral relations than a National Day commemoration.

Jointly organized by the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade and the Serbian government, the festivities included speeches from the Serbian president and the Chinese ambassador to Serbia, who both praised the Sino-Serbian cooperation, as echoed in a subsequent report by the China-CEE Institute.¹ The venue was decorated with the two countries' flags, which were displayed everywhere equal in size and number, and the program featured folk songs and dances from both traditions. The event itself was titled "Iron friendship² for common prosperity," in line with the notion of a long-standing, firm friendship that has characterized the discourse surrounding the Sino-Serbian relations in recent years. Yet, this paper aims to demonstrate that the described bond is less a deeply-rooted historical reality and more an example of consciously forging a narrative with the purpose of facilitating the bilateral cooperation.

In the context of joint 'Belt and Road Initiative' (hereinafter BRI) projects that are actively being implemented or planned, China and Serbia have declared that the two countries share a close and long-standing friendship. In this supposed friendship, cultural ties have a prominent role. However, this narrative seems to have emerged or at least significantly intensified only after the start of a closer economic cooperation. This paper analyzes the given change in discourse, aiming to answer the following research questions: 'when did this change occur?'; and 'how far is its reach?' The hypotheses put forward are that the discourse on Sino-Serbian cultural ties emphasizing the idea of a close and long-standing friendship started only after an increase in the political and economic cooperation, and that it is only or mostly present in the official discourse on the two countries' cooperation. Answering these research questions by tracing the development of the Sino-Serbian relations through empirical data will provide a basis for understanding the underlying mechanisms that likely govern the said change in discourse.

In the past decade, the global community witnessed the rise of the new Chinese connectivity initiative that is geared towards thoroughly transforming the way in which cultures communicate and cooperate. Since 2013, China has been promoting and implementing the BRI, also known by its first translation into English, i.e. 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR), which is aimed at creating a unified market and promoting a regional cooperation through infrastructural projects and investments. Even though the BRI was announced just five years ago, there have already been numerous studies on its background, motives, potentials, strategies, risks, and goals.³ The obvious significance

¹ I. Ladevac, 'Serbia-external relations briefing: Perception of the 70th anniversary of People's Republic of China in Serbia', *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing*, September 2019, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 1-4.

² The term used in Chinese is 钢铁友谊 *gāngtiě yǒuyì*, where the adjective for 'friendship' can mean either 'iron', 'steel' or 'iron and steel'. Because the first meaning is the most common for metaphorical uses, the translation of this phrase into English is most often "iron friendship". However, in Serbian, the 'steel friendship' (*čelično prijateljstvo*) phrasing is more common (than *gvozdeno prijateljstvo*), probably because it holds a reference to one of the biggest Chinese investments in Serbia, namely the HBIS-run steel mill in Smederevo.

³ Studies have been published both in China and abroad. For examples of the former ones, see: B. Feng, *One Belt and One Road: The Chinese Logic for Global Development* ("一带一路": 全球发展的

of this initiative lies in its sheer scale – which is reflected well in its informal name, namely the ‘New Silk Road’ – but another often mentioned point is the potential uniqueness of China’s official approach to the internal affairs of the so-called BRI countries. Namely, contrary to the so-called Western powers, Chinese investments seemingly come with ‘no strings attached’ in terms of the social and political order, neither explicitly (e.g. the conditions for EU accession) nor implicitly (e.g. the USA’s promotion of democracy). However, the question of the effects of China’s presence and the true extent of its influence in BRI countries is a heavily debated issue in academic and policy-making circles. Still, while the social and political aspects of this economic initiative are a contested issue, the fact that culture plays an important role in China’s foreign policy had been accepted long before the BRI.⁴ Consequently, since the rise of the BRI, there has been a proliferation of attempts to leverage cultural ties for attracting Chinese investments, e.g. a sweeping growth in the number of Silk Road nominations at UNESCO for registering heritage sites.⁵

Culture might be playing an important auxiliary role in the BRI, but the rate of development thus far has been mostly following an economically logical geographic path – from China’s Mainland through Southeast Asia and Northern Africa towards Europe, via land and maritime routes. There is, however, one notable exception in terms of the scope of investments, namely Serbia. Notably, a 2018 study reported that in the global ranking of the total value of Chinese projects announced since 2013, Serbia holds the 7th spot.⁶ The significant increase in the economic cooperation and the strengthening of bilateral ties between China and Serbia in recent years has been well analyzed.⁷ A small country in South Eastern Europe, Serbia is part of the so-called

中国逻辑), Beijing: China Democracy and Legal System Publishing House, 2015; Y. Wang, *The World is Connected: The Logic of the One Belt and One Road Initiative* (世界是通的: “一带一路”的逻辑), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016; W. Liu, *Understand the Blueprint for One Belt and One Road – A Detailed Explanation of Jointly Building One Belt and One Road: Concept, Practice and Contributions of China* (读懂“一带一路”蓝图 -- 共建一带一路: 理念实践与中国的贡献), Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2017; Y. Lin, *One Belt One Road 2.0: The New Pattern of the Silk Road under China’s Guidance* (“一带一路”2.0: 中国引领下的丝路新格局), Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2018). For examples of the latter ones, see: F. Godement and A. Kratz, “One Belt, One Road”: *China’s Great Leap Outward*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015; T. Lim, H. Chan, K. Tseng and W. Lim, *China’s One Belt One Road Initiative*, London: Imperial College Press, 2016; M. Mayer, *Rethinking the Silk Road*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018; X. Li, *Mapping China’s “One Belt One Road” Initiative*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴ See e.g.: J. S. Nye, ‘The Rise of China’s Soft Power’, *Wall Street Journal Asia*, 2005, No. 29, pp. 6-8; Y. Huang and S. Ding, ‘Dragon’s Underbelly: An Analysis of China’s Soft Power’, *East Asia*, 2006, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp. 22-44; J. Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007.

⁵ T. Winter, ‘One Belt, One Road, One Heritage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road’, *The Diplomat*, 2016, No. 29, pp. 1-5.

⁶ J. Kyngge, ‘A Tale of Two Harbours Tells Best and Worst of China’s “Belt and Road”’, *Financial Times*, 25 September 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/7699d13a-806a-11e8-af48-190d103e32a4>, (accessed on 12 December 2019).

For example, see: Z. Liu, ‘The role of Central and Eastern Europe in the building of silk road economic belt’, *Medjunarodni problemi*, 2015, Vol. 67, No. 2-3, pp. 184-195; D. Dimitrijević, ‘Chinese investments

Western Balkans, a region rife with ethnic and religious divisions, and countries with struggling political and economic systems. The region is also troubled by competing international influences – the USA, Russia, and the EU. Most of the Western Balkan countries were part of Yugoslavia, a socialist federation that lasted less than a century but had close ties with communist China, with Serbia being the federation’s legal successor. Still, in the past decades, they were under pressure to move away from their socialist past and transform and conform with the so-called EU values.⁸ Consequently, China’s relations with these countries have been complex.⁹ However, with the above-stated increase in the economic cooperation, a narrative professing unequivocal, traditional Sino-Serbian cultural closeness has emerged. This paper proposes that the theoretical framework suitable for understanding this phenomenon is the theory on cultural diversity, which can be used to explain how the narrative on Sino-Serbian cultural ties is an example of the top-down governance of cultural diversity.

Managing Culture in International Relations

There have long been attempts to situate culture in the fields of history, international relations (IR), and international political economy (IPE).¹⁰ The so-called cultural turn¹¹ has even led to a vast variety of opposing views on the significance and role of culture in researching global issues and relations¹² – from deeming it insignificant to overestimating its explanatory potential. Although at the start of the 21st century “the area of culture and international relations still appears nascent in scholarly writings,”¹³ the subsequent decades have led to several authors attempting to meaningfully integrate culture into their theoretical approaches. Akira Iriye has explored the ways in which

in Serbia: A Joint pledge for the future of the new Silk road’, *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 2017, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 64-83.

⁸ T. Petrović, *Mirroring Europe: Ideas of Europe and Europeanization in Balkan Societies*, Leiden: Brill, 2014.

⁹ J. Gledić, ‘Formal Vs. Informal Chinese Presence: The Underbelly of Hope in the Western Balkans’, in E. Hung and T. Ngo (eds.), *Shadow Economies across the New Silk Road*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, pp. 163-183.

¹⁰ See e.g. A. Iriye, ‘Culture and power: international relations as intercultural relations’, *Diplomatic History*, 1979, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 115-128; R. P. Anand (ed.), *Cultural factors in international relations*, Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981; N. G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989. The constructivist approach has also led to significant theoretical advances in formulating the social theory of international politics (e.g. R. Ashley, ‘The geopolitics of geopolitical space: toward a critical social theory of international politics’, *Alternatives*, 1987, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 403-434; A. Wendt, *Social theory of international politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Y. Lapid and F. V. Kratochwil (eds.), *The return of culture and identity in IR theory*, Boulder, CO: Rienner, 1996.

¹² L. Ray and A. Sayer (eds.), *Culture and economy after the cultural turn*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

¹³ R. Harshe, ‘Culture, Identity and International Relations’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006, p. 3945.

cultural factors can be incorporated into historical research.¹⁴ Following a proliferation of works that investigated the role of culture in IR research,¹⁵ Richard Ned Lebow has developed a cultural theory of international relations.¹⁶ Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop argue for the redefining of IPE as cultural political economy.¹⁷ Still, while these current mainstream theoretical approaches to the links between culture and economy and politics certainly have an analytical value, they also mostly inherit the cultural studies' past issue of defining culture.

Culture has long eluded precise definitions and its scope of meaning even overlaps with the concept of civilization.¹⁸ Some IR scholars attempt to overcome this by operationalizing specific types of culture in their empirical studies.¹⁹ However, an approach in line with the most recent developments in cultural studies would be to integrate the contemporary view of culture as inherently heterogeneous and complex, as in Christian Reus-Smit's theory on cultural diversity.²⁰ This approach postulates that culture cannot be neutralized by institutions, while, on the other hand, when it is embraced and institutionalized, there is a danger of mistaking its incorporated form for a coherent, natural reality. Reus-Smit challenges the mainstream view that the international order always emerges in homogenous cultural contexts and that diversity undermines order. Instead, he proposes that "managing, ruling, or governing diversity was a key imperative of order building"²¹ in many cases. Among others, he provides the example of the Qing dynasty in China. Here, institutions do not attempt to neutralize, nor to anchor culture, but, rather, they actively organize it.

This paper takes the above described theoretical framework as its departure point. Accordingly, the markers observed are related to the continuity – or lack thereof – of the way cultural diversity is organized. Specifically, in this case, the consistency in narratives over time and in terms of content is analyzed. Firstly, changes in the intensity (quantity) or the quality of the discourse on cultural ties – or both – need to be determined. Secondly, those changes need to be linked with official sources and

¹⁴ A. Iriye, 'Culture and International History', in M. Hogan and T. Paterson (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 241-256.

¹⁵ See e.g.: X. Yu (ed.), *Cultural factors in international relations*, Shanghai Institute of International Studies CRVP, 2004; M. Williams, 'Culture', in R. Adler-Nissen (ed.), *Bourdieu in international relations: Rethinking key concepts in IR*, London: Routledge, 2012.

¹⁶ R. N. Lebow, *A cultural theory of international relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁷ N. L. Sum and B. Jessop, *Towards a cultural political economy: Putting culture in its place in political economy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013.

¹⁸ R. Harshe, 'Culture, Identity and International Relations', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2006, pp. 3945-3951.

¹⁹ For example, political, strategic, and organizational cultures, as in J. Ferguson, 'The controversial role of culture in international relations', in *Advanced International Relations and Advanced Global Politics*, 2001.

²⁰ C. Reus-Smit, *On cultural diversity: International theory in a world of difference*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

²¹ C. Reus-Smit, *On cultural diversity: International theory...*, op. cit., p. 189.

made in line with the interests of the two governments or other institutions that are involved in the promotion of the new discourse. Once established, the management of cultural diversity can then be assessed in terms of cause (i.e. what triggered the start of more active management). Reus-Smit's theory postulates two possibilities – changes in material reality and a bottom-up protest. Based on the following analysis, this paper proposes a third, co-influencing factor – the existence of narratives on culture that are not in line with new economic aims and circumstances.

The above theoretical approach is applied to empirical evidence in the following sections via a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The development of the Sino-Serbian relations was traced through analyses of previous research, official documents of the two countries' ministries of foreign affairs, news reports in national media, as well as observation and semi-structured interviews.²² Data was extracted manually and – in the case where official document corpora were created – semi-automatically, using the linguistic BootCaT software²³ to initially extract the texts before they were manually checked. Numerical data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, while textual data was processed using the LancsBox corpus analysis software.²⁴ The sources were primarily in Chinese and Serbian,²⁵ while in some cases the English-language data was also used for comparison.

Sino-Serbian Ties Before the BRI

As stated, Serbia seems to stand out as the leading partner of China in the Western Balkan region, and even – relatively speaking – a significant one on the global scale.²⁶ The symbolic Sino-Serbian Friendship Bridge over the Danube was completed in 2014; the acquisition of a steel plant in the city of Smederevo by the Chinese Hesteel Group was the largest foreign investment in Serbia in 2016; and the agreement to construct a high-speed railway from Belgrade to Budapest is considered a major milestone in the plan to develop a trans-Balkan route connecting Western Europe with the port of Piraeus.²⁷ On the sidelines of the 2018 United Nations General Assembly in New York, the Foreign Ministers of China and Serbia met and released a statement reaffirming

²² More specific sampling details are given throughout the analysis where relevant. All analyses were performed in November 2019. As for the results of observation and semi-structured interviews, these come from the past decade, during which the author was working as a university Chinese-language instructor in Belgrade, Serbia, and thus had the opportunity to observe the implementation of BRI negotiations and projects, and to interview colleagues and former students who have been working as translators and interpreters.

²³ M. Baroni and S. Bernardini, *BootCaT: Bootstrapping corpora and terms from the web*, Proceedings of LREC, 2004.

²⁴ V. Brezina, M. Timperley and T. McEnery, #LancsBox v. 4.x [software], 2018, available at: <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox>.

²⁵ Presented in the analysis; translated into English by the author.

²⁶ J. Kyngé, 'A Tale of Two Harbours ...', op. cit.

²⁷ P. Tonchev, 'China's Road: into the Western Balkans', Brief – No 3, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 15 February 2017.

the long-term sincerity, amity, and friendship between the two countries,²⁸ which is now being called an ‘iron friendship,’ as noted above.

However, the road to the present relationship has been long and winding.²⁹ While Yugoslavia was one of the first countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China after its founding, relations were only established in 1955 due to the conflict with the USSR. Some authors state that the relationship has been harmonious ever since, but historical data clearly shows that the ties between the two countries were affected by turbulent national and international politics, as well as the ambitions of their leaders. The Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito did not visit China until after Mao’s death,³⁰ and while Yugoslavia was a good example of an alternative model of socialist development for China, the economic cooperation was modest. This was further amplified by the 1980s economic crisis and the rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia. During the civil war and break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Serbia maintained close ties with China while at the same time it was isolated from the rest of the world by strict economic sanctions. Still, this period, which is now considered to have been a dictatorship, was also marked by strong opposition to the then ruling Serbian socialist party, which is why ties with China were interpreted in that context.

The above state of affairs between the two countries is reflected in a relatively even and steady number of bilateral agreements being signed periodically from the establishment of diplomatic relations, with a pronounced rising trend starting only in the second decade of the 21st century (Figure 1).³¹ This coincides with the start of the BRI and its involvement in Serbia, and the narrative about the long-standing, traditional Sino-Serbian friendship. As stated above, claims of strong cultural ties and closeness between the two countries have become commonplace in the public discourse, but the bilateral agreements related to culture do not fully support that notion. Namely, Figure 1 shows that while one of the first bilateral agreements signed was related to culture, the second one was signed only half a century later, and since then a new one has been signed every few years. While it is possible that the first agreement related to culture was comprehensive enough to be effective in the subsequent several decades, it is more likely that cultural ties were less actively governed prior to the recent increase in economic cooperation.

Parallel to the loose maintenance of cultural ties on the official, state level, cultural bonds and affinity between China and Yugoslavia during the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century are well noted in popular culture and individual

²⁸ Press releases by the ministries of foreign affairs of China (25 September 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1599513.shtml) and Serbia (24 September 2018, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/statements/18164-great-friendship-strategic-partnership-and-strong-alliance-between-serbia-and-china>). Accessed on 12 December 2019.

²⁹ S. Arežina, *Relations between PR China and Yugoslavia and Serbia from 1977 to 2009*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Sciences, 2013.

³⁰ He visited Beijing in 1977.

³¹ Raw data obtained from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, <http://www.mfa.gov.rs/>.

cross-cultural experiences.³² However, these links connect points in the histories of the two countries that might not be the most desirable to highlight at present. Three cases are the most salient examples of this, as elaborated below, namely Yugoslav films from the communist era that were popular in China, cheap Chinese goods available in Serbia during the 1990s economic sanctions, and the 1999 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The negative circumstances associated with these ties could be a reason why, with the increase in economic cooperation, the two states took a more active role in controlling the narrative about the roots of the bilateral friendship.

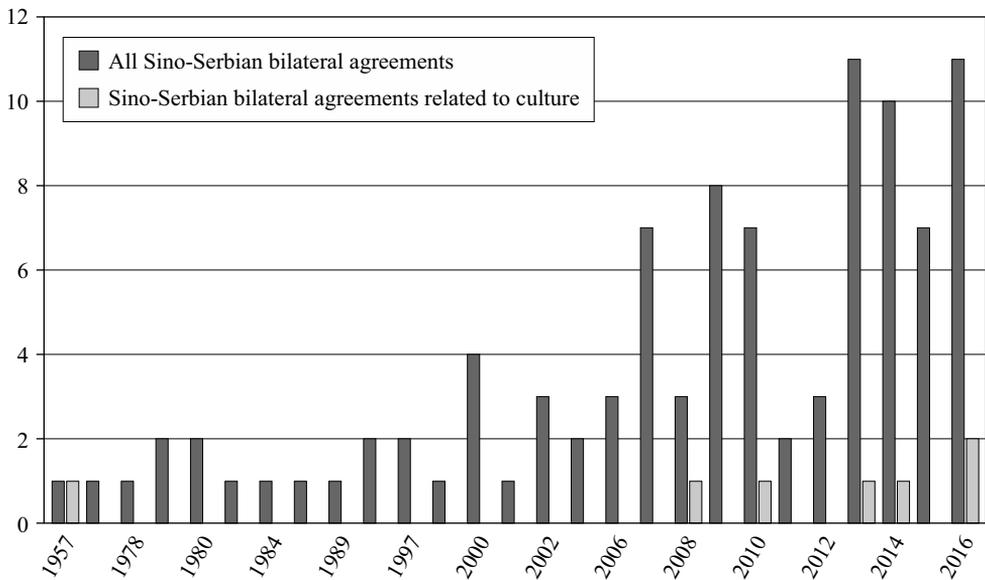


Figure 1. Sino-Serbian bilateral agreements

Source: own study.

Firstly, when it comes to film, after the Sino-Soviet split China turned to other communist countries for – among others – entertainment, and thus the Yugoslav World-War-Two-themed *Walter Defends Sarajevo* and *The Bridge* were among the first foreign films to be released after the Cultural Revolution.³³ The films supposedly shaped a generation of the Chinese and remain popular to this date, as there is ample anecdotal evidence that people from former Yugoslav territories are still asked about these films and reminded of the Chinese-language version of the anti-fascist anthem *Bella ciao*, which was featured in *The Bridge*. This cultural artefact was used in promoting the Sino-Serbian cooperation in the past two decades, with the leading actor playing

³² J. Gledić, 'Formal Vs. Informal Chinese...', op. cit.

³³ Ibidem.

the hero fighting the ‘bad guys’ in these films and participating in various campaigns off-screen until his death in 2016, which was mourned in leading Chinese media. However, for China, this recalls a time when there were many struggles in the bilateral relations with world powers on the international stage and even a stricter control of entertainment on the internal front. For Serbia, it brings up the complex Yugoslav heritage and unresolved questions about political factions that existed during World War Two, one of which is depicted in these so-called Partisan films.

Secondly, there is the question of perception of China and the Chinese in Serbia. The 1990s saw an influx of Chinese migrants to Serbia from Hungary, which was due to stricter Hungarian immigration policies.³⁴ During the dissolution of Yugoslavia, China was seen both as a political ally of the ruling dictatorship, as shown above, and as a producer of cheap goods that enabled the local population to survive under economic sanctions. Thus, the views of the local population on the Chinese were generally negative, except for seeing the migrants as helpful during a time of crisis³⁵ – again, a fact that does not fit in well with the positive image of common growth and prosperity, promoted today by the two countries’ governments. The perception of China in Serbia has since changed, likely owing to economic reasons (the rise of China), but also changes on the global scene (the European debt crisis).³⁶ Today, regardless of the realities of the political and economic cooperation, China is mostly perceived as one of two extremes – an opportunity to aid development or a threat to internal affairs.³⁷

Finally, an event that fortified the bond between the two countries and the two peoples was the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the 1999 NATO military intervention against Yugoslavia. Because of the death of three Chinese citizens, it is sometimes said in officials’ statements that the two countries have a blood bond, and it is implied that they have a common ‘enemy.’ The site of the former embassy is visited every year on the anniversary of the bombing, and it is now the place where one of the largest Chinese cultural centers in the region is being built. Still, while this incident remains a potent catalyst for enhancing closeness between the two cultures, it is also deeply embedded in a tragic, very negative context.

Forging the ‘Iron Friendship’

With the start of the BRI, the economic cooperation between China and Serbia increased, which brought about changes in the narratives on the relationship between the two countries. Implicit manifestations of this are evident in the changes in the scope

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ A. Trklja, *Pozicija kineskih imigranata u svesti građana Beograda*, Unpublished master thesis, Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade, Serbia, 2009.

³⁶ M. Avakumović, ‘Od prodavca bofl robe do graditelja mostova i pruga’, *Politika*, 26 September 2012.

³⁷ D. Pavličević, “‘China Threat’ and ‘China Opportunity’”: Politics of Dreams and Fears in China–Central and Eastern European Relations’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, Vol. 27, No. 113, pp. 688-702.

and focus of academic writings and media texts on the Sino-Serbian relations. Namely, in Serbia there is a trend of increased research interest when it comes to China-related topics, which is also the case in other Central and Eastern European Countries that are part of the 17+1 Initiative.³⁸ There has been a large number of recently published studies related to various political and economic topics³⁹ as well as several others related to the perception and representation of the Sino-Serbian relations in the media and the public.⁴⁰

Prior to the BRI, studies related to China had been fewer in number and different in scope – researchers mostly dealt with the social and cultural aspects of Sino-Serbian ties,⁴¹ emphasizing the above outlined informal bonds between the two countries. Contrary to that, recent papers often echo the narrative present in official statements, as in the above example of the report on the celebration of the 70th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China in Belgrade. The shift in discourse is also discernible in media texts. A search for the keywords ‘China’, ‘Serbia’, and ‘friendship’ in the two countries’ leading national newspapers⁴² clearly shows that texts containing these keywords started to occur more frequently around the launch of the BRI (Figures 2 and 3⁴³). While overall small in number (apart from the Chinese-language

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ D. Mitrović, ‘China in the Western East and Beyond: Politics and Economics of the China Plus Sixteen Cooperation Framework’, *Serbian Political Thought*, 2014, No. 2, pp. 19-50; V. N. Cvetković (ed.), *Novi put svile: balkanska perspektiva: političko-bezbednosni aspekti*, Belgrade: University of Belgrade Faculty of Security Studies, 2016; D. Dimitrijević, ‘Chinese investments in Serbia: A Joint pledge for the future of the new Silk road’, *Baltic Journal of European Studies*, 2017, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 64-83; I. Lađevac (ed.), *Budućnost saradnje Kine i Srbije*, Belgrade: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, 2018.

⁴⁰ S. Jojić, ‘How Serbia Perceives “the Belt and the Road” Initiative and 16+1 Cooperation’, *China–CEE Institute Working Paper*, 2017, No. 9; A. Mitić, ‘Belt and Road Strategic Communication Resilience: Lessons from the SERBIA–BRI Frame Analysis’, *China–CEE Institute Working Paper*, 2017, No. 19; D. Pavličević, ‘“China Threat” and “China Opportunity”: Politics of Dreams and Fears in China–Central and Eastern European Relations’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2018, pp.1-15.

⁴¹ S. Milutinović, ‘Kineski transnacionalni preduzetnici u Budimpešti i Beogradu: u potrazi za tržištima tranzicionih ekonomija’, *Sociologija*, 2005, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 143-160; M. Mančić, *Način života Kineza na Novom Beogradu*, Unpublished graduate thesis, University of Belgrade, Serbia, 2007; I. Đorđević, ‘Chinesen in Serbien–(un) erwünschte Gäste. Ost-West’, *Europäische Perspektiven*, 2006, No. 7, pp. 115-122; G. Blagojević, ‘Savremeni stereotipi Srba o Kinezima u Beogradu: Kada kažeš Kina, mislim Blok 70 ili’, *Zbornik Matice srpske za društvene nauke*, 2009, No. 128, pp. 47-61; A. Trklja, *Pozicija kineskih imigranata u svesti građana Beograda*, Unpublished master thesis, Faculty of Philosophy University of Belgrade, Serbia, 2009; B. Jovičević, *Kinezi u Pančevu: ekonomsko antropološka studija*, Zemun: MostArt, 2013; S. T. Rucker-Chang, ‘Filmic representations of the Chinese presence in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Slovenia’, in F. B. Chang and S. T. Rucker-Chang, *Chinese Migrants in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 199-220; M. Korać, ‘Transnational pathways to integration: Chinese traders in Serbia’, *Sociologija*, 2013, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 245-260; Z. Rakić, ‘Kinezi u Leskovcu: život sa kineskim zidom oko sebe’, *Leskovački zbornik*, 2014, No. 54, pp. 441-454.

⁴² In Serbia, the Serbian-language version of *Politika* was researched (<http://www.politika.rs/>), while for China the results from both the Chinese and English versions of *Renmin ribao* are provided (<http://www.people.cn/> and <http://en.people.cn/>).

⁴³ The data from the Chinese-language version *Renmin ribao* is shown separately due to the overall much larger number of texts.

version of *Renmin ribao*,) the texts reveal a trend that is best reflected in the analysis of the language of official documents.

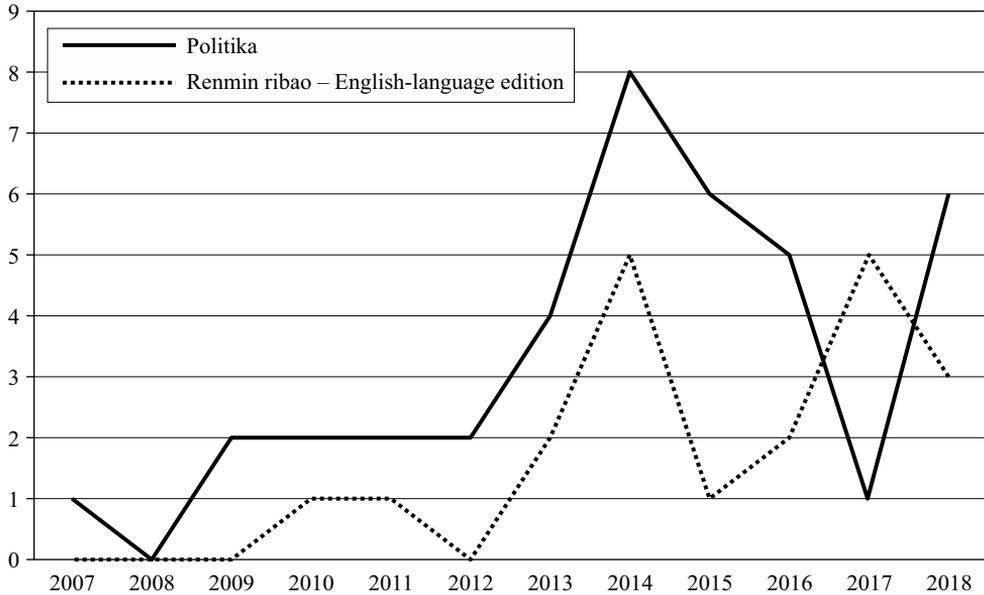


Figure 2. Number of texts containing the keywords ‘China’ + ‘Serbia’ + ‘friendship’ in leading Serbian and Chinese national media outlets

Source: own study.

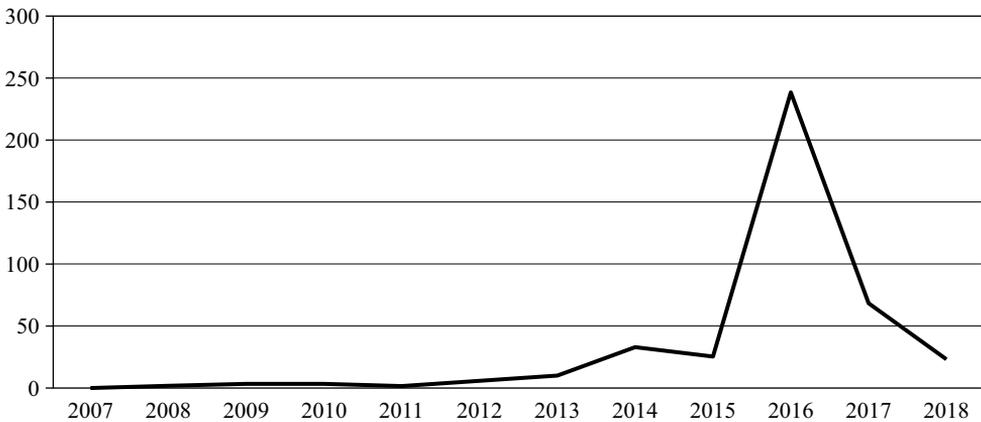


Figure 3. Number of texts containing the keywords ‘China’ + ‘Serbia’ + ‘friendship’ in the Chinese-language version of *Renmin ribao*

Source: own study.

The corpus analysis of texts from the two countries' line ministries that mention the bilateral relationship⁴⁴ – coupled with interview data which will be elaborated below – provides explicit support for the proposition that an increase in top-down management of cultural diversity occurred along with the rise in economic cooperation under the BRI. Both sides mention the official framework of the cooperation – the comprehensive strategic partnership, but other terms are also used to describe the nature of the relationship. These terms are consistently changing over time in the wording of both countries' official documents, often appearing in quotations. The first mentions of friendship in the context of the bilateral relationship appear – similar to how it is with media texts – around the first decade of the 21st century, in the form of the term 'traditional friendship'. The second most frequent adjective is 'deep', followed by 'sincere', with several occurrences of 'warm', 'special', 'great', 'long-term', and 'close'. Finally, the most recent texts include the term 'iron friendship'.

The first adjective used to describe the bilateral friendship in both cases – i.e. 'traditional' – has been the most frequently used one to date. This could be explained by the fact that the meaning of this word refers to the bonds between the two countries – as shown in the previous section – but it does not reveal the outlined complicated or negative connotations. It also situates the relationship in terms of duration, i.e. long-lasting, without qualifying the nature of the 'friendship' over time. This is corroborated by another finding from the corpus analysis, namely that some officials mention in their statements a 'lag' in the relationship or a rekindling of relations. It is possible that other descriptors of the nature of the bilateral relationship will become more frequent over time, but it is clear that 'traditional friendship' was the term preferred by both sides in the past decade.

As economic cooperation under the BRI increased, the discourse reaffirming the closeness between the two countries found in the official documents also intensified. The most recent texts state that the present time is the highest point in the history of the Sino-Serbian relations, and in 2019 the term 'iron friendship' also started to emerge in the analyzed corpus. The term is mostly found in quotes of statements of government officials reported by the ministries, which is in line with the increased use of this phrase in public speeches of officials of both countries in the past several years. The 'iron friendship' was first mentioned as early as 2017,⁴⁵ and it seems to be gradually replacing the 'traditional friendship' phrase. Here, however, it is significant to note that Serbia is not the only BRI country with an 'iron friendship' with China. As early as 2016, studying the BRI in Central Asia, researchers noted that this phrase was an indicator of the status of a country's partnership with China, with the next – more

⁴⁴ All texts mentioning the other country were extracted from the native-language versions of the respective ministries of foreign affairs' websites.

⁴⁵ For example, by the Serbian president ('ČELIČNO PRIJATELJSTVO: Naša je politika nepromenljiva, a to je politika jedne Kine', *Telegraf*, 12 April 2017) or the Chinese ambassador to Serbia ('POPOVIĆ I MANČANG: Odnose Srbije i Kine odlikuje "ČELIČNO PRIJATELJSTVO"', *Patriot*, 18 October 2017).

advanced – stage in bilateral relations labeled as ‘all-weather.’⁴⁶ Furthermore, in official documents of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan co-occurs with the term ‘iron friendship’ more often than Serbia does.

Hence, a more active management of cultural diversity in this context can be seen through the seemingly coordinated spreading of terms describing the relationship in official documents – such as the presently promoted ‘iron friendship’ – even beyond the example of Sino-Serbian relations studied in this paper. Furthermore, this process can be assessed as top-down as it is not in line with the perceptions of the relations ‘on the ground’ registered in other data. Observations and semi-structured interviews with the participants in BRI projects reveal a perception of the bilateral relationship consistent with the complexities outlined in the previous section. They also show that cultural differences pose a challenge in cooperation and that the closeness proclaimed in the official narrative does not translate into relationships between people. Informants have consistently stated⁴⁷ that there are many communication issues in the cross-cultural teams implementing BRI projects in Serbia, and it is evident from observation that those who have more experience with the other culture (e.g. Serbian translators who spent long periods of time in China) are more successful in establishing a mutual understanding. Some responses even directly affirm that the informants feel like the current narratives claiming very close Sino-Serbian relations are engineered in order to nurture support for BRI projects in the wider public, while the authors of these statements themselves are aware that business operations will meet the same challenges as with any other cross-cultural collaboration. Mostly, the informants adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on the economic benefits of increased cooperation in terms of their careers. Similarly, these results also point to another factor that is seen as an indicator of Sino-Serbian closeness, but is highly pragmatic, namely the fact that Serbia was the first European country to grant Chinese citizens visa-free entry. In responses mentioning this, it is unclear whether the informants think that the visa-free entry was established because of the two countries’ friendship, or if they see the other country as friendly owing to the fact that it established this system.

In further support of the proposition that the Sino-Serbian relations under the BRI are a clear example of proactive, top-down management of cultural diversity with the goal of establishing order, a final example is presented, i.e. the recent establishment of joint Sino-Serbian police patrols in Belgrade. This case was widely reported in both Serbian and Chinese media and it illustrates well the duality in narratives and perceptions that reaffirms the given claim. Namely, officials’ statements and media texts applauded this scheme and emphasized how helpful it would be for the many Chinese tourists coming to Belgrade under the visa-free regime, also stating that the joint patrols will be

⁴⁶ M. P. van Dijk and P. Martens, ‘The Silk Road and Chinese interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus: The case of Georgia’, *Maastricht School of Management Working Paper*, 2016, No. 2016/12.

⁴⁷ The most recent interview was conducted in October 2019.

a tourist attraction themselves and that they will serve as ambassadors of the friendship between the two countries.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the online comments on related articles as well as observation and interview data all clearly show confusion and concern among Serbian citizens. The confusion is over the details related to this project, including the scope of authority of the Chinese police officers, which leads to speculations that then breed concern. Similar sentiments – apprehension about the Chinese presence in Serbia – were recently voiced by the EU as well.⁴⁹ Interestingly, this comes at the same time as France’s opposition to the accession of North Macedonia and Albania to the EU is being seen as a mistake that further alienates the Western Balkans,⁵⁰ which makes the given study also relevant for tracing the future course of the development of the EU, in addition to its central goal of elucidating the Sino-Serbian relations and the role of culture in the BRI.

Conclusion

The present research demonstrated that the development of Sino-Serbian relations under the BRI clearly shows the active, top-down management of narratives related to culture as well as the proactive engineering of delineations of the nature of bilateral relations, all in line with the theory on cultural diversity. The ample empirical data confirms that the current so-called ‘iron friendship’ between China and Serbia is less a deeply-rooted historical reality and more an example of the conscious forging of authorized narratives, likely to the purpose of facilitating the bilateral cooperation and establishing the order.

While the theory applied in this research outlines two factors that lead to changes in the established configuration of cultural diversity – a change in material resources and revolt against existing hierarchies⁵¹ – the results of this study indicate a possible third factor. Namely, before the active engineering of the Sino-Serbian friendship in connection with the BRI, cultural bonds between the two countries had existed, but they had been embedded in negative contexts or related to the parts of national histories that might provoke unresolved tensions. Hence, it is possible that the established cultural diversity can be re-engineered not only due to external material changes or the bottom-up protest, but also if it is not in line with the desired wider narratives of governments. This possibility will be further explored in future research.

⁴⁸ Similar texts continued to appear in most news outlets for several weeks (see e.g.: ‘Kineska policija patrolira Beogradom’, *Politika*, 18 September 2019; ‘Nova atrakcija na beogradskim ulicama, SVI BI DA SE SLIKAJU SA KINESKIM POLICAJCIMA’, *Blic*, 21 September 2019).

⁴⁹ J. Petrović, ‘Fajon: Ozbiljne brige Brisela zbog Kineza, poslova s prodajom oružja, medija...’, *NI*, 31 October 2019.

⁵⁰ K. Kolozova, ‘How the EU balkanised the Balkans’, *Al Jazeera*, 2 November 2019.

⁵¹ C. Reus-Smit, *On cultural diversity: International theory...*, op. cit.

The fact that the narrative on close cultural ties intensified with an increase in economic cooperation – and that the notion of a deep friendship between China and Serbia has been actively managed since the start of the BRI – is relevant both to the future development of the Sino-Serbian relations and to a better understanding of the mechanisms under which the BRI operates, as well as to how its projects are implemented. Consequently, this research also provides useful insights for other BRI countries – especially those with a communist heritage or strong bonds with China – predating the BRI. Finally, the results of this study also bear significance for EU scholars, particularly at a time when Western European countries are increasingly criticized for alienating countries on the borders of the EU, leaving them open to influences from other global powers. This research corroborates the claim that the active institutional management of culture – rather than attempts to neutralize its effects, as is the case in most European multicultural societies – can lead to an enhanced cooperation and order, as outlined in the theory on cultural diversity. Therefore, global powers should be aware of the fact that culture undoubtedly matters and that it needs to be embraced in the process of developing bilateral and international relations.