Central and Eastern European Countries Through the Eyes of Chinese Social Media: A Case Study of the Official Micro-Blog of China's Foreign Ministry with Regard to European Affairs

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In order to promote public understanding of Europe and the Sino-European relations, on August 24, 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China opened an official micro-blog through a Sina Weibo account named '@Zhongou Xinshi' (which could be translated into English as 'Sino–Europe messenger'). In this paper, the authors apply textual and content analysis methods to examine the posts in the micro-blog in order to find out what kind of image of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been shaped by Chinese officials, as reflected in this specific Chinese social media account from 2012 on. The main findings of this study have revealed that the Chinese government is shaping the images of the CEE region on three levels: first, there is the whole region of CEE; second, there are the sub-regions, such as the Baltic countries, Visegard group, Balkan countries; and the third level is represented by the sixteen CEEC considered separately. The quantitative analysis based on the investigated posts shows an evident asymmetry between the images of sub-regions and individual countries. Meanwhile, countries that have closer political or economic relations with China have been posted on the '@Zhongou Xinshi' more frequently.

Keywords: CEE, Chinese social media, sub-regions, bilateral relations, China–CEE political and economic relations

Introduction

Public diplomacy helps shed light on the image of a given country within another country or for other people. It is also an important means for a country to create its own national image and promote itself. Nowadays, with the rapid development of information technology and networks, accompanied by the increasing number

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of Internet users, social media have become an important platform for information dissemination and exchange. Similar to a hybrid of Twitter and Facebook, Weibo is one of the most popular sites in China and is accessed by well over 30% of Internet users in the country, with a market penetration similar to that of Twitter in the USA.[1] Starting from 2009, the Chinese domestic Internet business devoted a lot of resources to the Weibo platform construction. Sina Weibo, one of the most popular Chinese Weibo websites, was officially opened to the public in October 2009. The opening of Sina Weibo meant the beginning of an era of micro-blogs for Chinese netizens.[2] Pursuant to the 43rd 'Statistics Report of China's Internet Development',[3] issued by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), by February 2019 the number of China's Internet users reached 829 million. The number of active users of the micro-blog each month increased to 462 million, and the number of active users in the micro-blog each month increased to 200 million (monthly active users, MAU). Most of the Weibo users are highly educated persons; e.g. those who have graduated from junior college and have received higher education accounted for 70.8% of the total of users. Meanwhile, according to the Sina Weibo Data Center Report,[4] until the end of December 2018, those aged 18–22 years old had a share of 35% of the total amount of users; those aged between 23–30 amounted to the percentage of 40%; those aged 31–40 achieved circa 14%; and those over 40 years old had a share of only 5% in the total of users. In this context, traditional authorities also opened their Weibo accounts, wishing to increase their presence online. To the end of 2018, the number of government micro-blogs certified by the Sina Platform reached 138,253.[5] The micro-blogs of foreign embassies in China have a great impact on Chinese audiences during the era of 'Public Diplomacy 2.0.'[6]

On August 24, 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFA of PRC) created the official micro-blog account on Sina Weibo, called '@Zhongou Xinshi' (which could be translated into English as 'Sino-European messenger'). The main page of this account stresses the primary aims: releasing important news on China's

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[1] 'China's Weibos vs US's Twitter: And the Winner Is?', *Forbes*, 2011, www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2011/05/17/chinas-weibos-vs-uss-twitter-and-the-winner-is (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[2] L. Song and Q. Bian, 'The EU through the eyes of Chinese social media: A case study of the official micro-blog of Chinese Foreign Ministry', *International Communication Gazette*, 2016, Vol. 78, No. 1-2, pp. 64-82.

[3] China Internet Network Information Centre, 'Statistical Report on China Internet Development in China', 2019, www1.cnnic.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201310/P020131029430558704972.pdf (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[4] Sina Weibo Data Center Report, 'Weibo users development report', 2018, http://dy.163.com/v2/article/detail/EAT2BG8D0511B3FV.html (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[5] Ibidem.

[6] See: A. Arsenault, 'Public Diplomacy 2.0', in P. Seib (ed.), *Toward a New Public Diplomacy: Redirecting US Foreign Policy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 139-144; L. Khatib, W. Dutton and M. Thelwall, 'Public Diplomacy 2.0: A Case Study of the US Digital Outreach Team', *The Middle East Journal*, 2012, Vol. 66, No. 3, pp. 453-472.

diplomatic activities and policies towards Europe, and introducing European politics, economy, culture, and customs.[7] The first post stressed that the '@Zhongou Xinshi' gives a new perspective by showing Europe through the Chinese eyes and provides the public with a platform for communicating and understanding each other.[8] The '@Zhongou Xinshi' counted 2,500 posts and 1.25 million fans at its 1st anniversary in August 2013. At present, there are over 320,000 posts and 17 million fans,[9] and original posts constitute up to 95%. In addition, it is also the only micro-blog account link listed on the official website of the 'Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC)', which reflects the official discourse about CEEC. Therefore, this micro-blog can be regarded as representative of the position and views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China.

In general, the specialized literature in China focuses on images of big powers or countries close to China. There are also papers on China's image in other countries and regions, including CEE.[10] Since China put forward the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 cooperation platform, Central and Eastern European Countries have caught the Chinese public's attention. The 16+1 platform involves sixteen countries from Central and Eastern Europe[11] as well as China. After common interest in establishing the platform had been identified in the first round of consultations during the China–CEE National Economic and Trade Forum in 2011, the 16+1 was officially established as a multilateral framework in 2012 during the then Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Poland and a meeting with leaders and high-level representatives of sixteen CEEC.

In the early post-World-War-Two period, the two sides fostered their economic ties and political communication. Yet, China and CEE were generally quite distant to each other (with several exceptions, including Romania) due to the persistent tensions between the USSR, Yugoslavia, and China. Since the end of the Cold War, the political and economic relations between CEE and China have significantly lagged behind those between China and Western European countries, as illustrated by the low intensity of diplomatic interactions between CEEC and China. The CEEC have had as a major objective their integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures, including the aim of becoming EU and NATO member countries. Since 2012, China's multilateral cooperation with CEE has progressed from "rediscovering" each other to a structured exploration of common

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[7] Chinese Foreign Ministry for European Affairs official Weibo, 2019, http://weibo.com/wjbozs (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[8] Ibidem.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] I. M. Oehler-Şincai, 'China's achievements in terms of development, a valuable asset influencing its perception in CEE', *China-CEE Institute, Working Paper No. 33*, November 2018, https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Work_paper-201833-Iulia-Monica-Oehler-S%CC%A6incai.pdf (accessed on 28 August 2019).

[11] These countries are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

interests.[12] Although the 16+1 cooperation continues to deepen, the CEEC are not as well-known as some Western European countries – such as the United Kingdom and France – to the Chinese public, in contrast to the situation prior to the fall of the Iron Curtain. Therefore, for the Chinese people, there is a need for more relevant pieces of information about CEEC in order to outline images of this region and specific countries. In this framework, the question arises as to what kind of CEE image has been shaped by Chinese officials to the Chinese public. In an interview with Mr Xiong, conducted on 10 October, 2019, he underlined that the main function of the official micro-blog of the MFA of the PRC is to release important news on China's EU policy and the China–EU relations in a timely manner. In his opinion, the China–CEE cooperation is part of the China–Europe cooperation and it is also the main determinant for the increasing number of posts on the '@Zhongou Xinshi'. Information on CEE is a relevant instrument designed to help the public to better understand the 16+1 cooperation as well as increase the awareness of Central and Eastern Europe. The literature already incorporates significant conclusions about the Chinese-CEE economic and political cooperation under the 16+1 platform as well as about the CEE image shaped in the public diplomacy.[13]

This article examines the '@Zhongou Xinshi' (the Chinese Foreign Ministry for European Affairs' official Weibo) and the posts issued on the '@Zhongou Xinshi' with the aim of obtaining answers to the following questions: 1) What kind of image of Central and Eastern Europe has been presented by Chinese officials to the Chinese public?; 2) How does the MFA of the PRC use its own official Weibo to increase the public understanding of CEEC?

Methodology

To answer the questions regarding the ways in which the MFA of the PRC presents the image of CEEC in its official Weibo, this study used textual and content analysis. This study is based on a sample of posts on '@Zhongou Xinshi' from 24th August, 2012 (when the account released the first post) to 31st December, 2018. The total number of posts from the '@Zhongou Xinshi' in this period is 24,081. For this study, the authors selected all the posts on the micro-blog that refer to the CEE region, three CEE sub-regions (the Baltic region, the Balkans, and the Visegrad Group,) and sixteen

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[12] L. Song and D. Pavlićević, 'China's Multilayered Multilateralism: A case study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework', *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2019, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 277-302.

[13] The relevant research papers on this topic include: L. Song, 'From Rediscovery to New Cooperation: The Relationship between China and CEE', *EU-China Observer*, 2013, No. 5, pp. 8-14; M. Kaczmarski and J. Jakóbowski, 'China on Central-Eastern Europe: "16+1" as seen from Beijing, *OSW COMMENTARY* , 2015, No. 166; A. Buhmann and D. Ingenhoff, 'The 4D Model of the country image: An integrative approach from the perspective of communication management', *International Communication Gazette*, 2015, No. 77, pp. 104-124; M. D. Dodd and S. J. Collins, 'Public Relations message strategies and public diplomacy 2.0: An empirical analysis using Central-Eastern European and Western Embassy Twitter Accounts', *Public Relations Review*, 2017, No. 43, pp. 417-425.

countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia – in alphabetical order). After we had excluded the non-original content of all the posts, 5,646 posts on the '@ Zhongou Xinshi' were used for the data set.

Code Book Development

This study selected 5,646 posts from the '@Zhongou Xinshi' as a sample whereby each post represents a unit for analysis. Each post includes not only basic information such as text, the number of comments, the number of reposts, the number of 'thumbs up', and date, but also column labels used to define the content of posts. The categories and definitions of our coding framework were adapted from a series of formal studies into official Weibo posts/accounts in the social media environment.[14]

The analysis in this study includes the following:
1. Targeted public (including the object followed and the analysis of the fans);
2. Contents' characteristics (including content categories, areas, and topics);
3. Public reaction (including the number of reposts and comments as well as the 'thumb up' sign).

Three researchers (WeiLing Ding, Lilei Song, and Shuyuan Sun) read through each post independently and used single words to describe the main meaning of each post.

First, using key sampling methods, the team selected the top ten most popular posts regarding the CEE region, three sub-regions, and each of the CEEC in the total of the 195 posts related to CEE. The analysis took into account: micro-blog tag, content category, the popularity of each region and country, and the attitude of netizens to the content.

Next, we grouped messages into ten sub-categories according to their contents, including: bilateral relations, economy, history, culture, society, tourism, gourmet, music, sports, and education. 'Bilateral relations' mainly refers to bilateral political relations and diplomatic interactions between China and a given CEEC. The 'economy' category introduces the economic condition and economic policies of CEEC. Within the 'history' category, interesting historical facts and events within CEEC have been posted. 'Culture' is a more extensive category as it includes languages, religions, customs and festivals, etc. in the CEE regions and CEEC. 'Society' involves the introduction of social events, social customs, and anecdotes relating to Central and Eastern Europe. The contents in the 'travel' category focus on the introduction of famous attractions in Central and Eastern Europe or tours of Chinese stars and TV programs shot in CEEC. In 'gourmet', most of the posts introduce distinctive cuisines from Central and Eastern Europe. The 'music' category covers the interactions between Chinese and European musicians

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[14] N. Liu, 'Literature review of research on Chinese government Weibo', *E-government*, 2012, No. 6, pp. 38-43; Wang, 2013: 27-34; Yang, 2009: 19.

as well as music competitions, etc. The 'sports' category mainly includes the news on the participation of Chinese and European athletes in various sports events. Finally, 'education' covers topics on education and examinations in China and CEEC.

Subsequently, 'tags' were picked, referring to each category accompanying the symbol '#' in the micro-blog content, which is the summary of the topic of micro-blog. For example, if there is a #travel around Europe# phrase in a certain post content, then the tag is 'Travel around Europe'. All posts tagged by '16+1 cooperation' were selected and evaluated.

'Netizens' attitude' reveals what kind of overall attitude netizens have towards the contents of a post. It can be divided into three types: positive, neutral, and negative. A positive attitude means that most netizens express affirmative opinions, such as interest and affection, or agree with the opinions expressed by the post. A neutral attitude means that some netizens had positive responses to a post content, while others showed some confusion or negative views, but, generally, no obvious tendency was visible. The criteria for assessing the attitude were based on the contents of comments and the number of 'thumbs up' sign combined. If there was no comment on a post, then the average attitude was decided merely by the number of the 'thumbs up' sign. When the majority of reactions was reflected by 'thumbs up', the public attitude could be considered as positive.

Coding Procedures and Inter-Coder Reliability

The coding of 195 posts from the '@Zhongou Xinshi' was then performed by three trained coders who reviewed all of the posts independently. In order to develop and complete the codebook for the content analysis of all the posts, a random sample of 10% of all posts (n=20) was selected. Each post was classified into only one theme. In case of a disagreement between two coders, a third coders' evaluation was used to determine the final coding. If the content of the post did not fit any of the themes, it was then coded as 'other' and was not included in the final analysis of this study. In the end, the kappa score of 0.815 was calculated, which demonstrated that the inter-coder reliability was excellent.

Results

Posts Tagged by the 16+1 Cooperation

The tag is a word or some words that a micro-blog publisher adds to the content with the aim of summarizing the post content. The *posts tagged by 16+1 cooperation* category represents almost all of the events related to the bilateral relations between China and CEEC. The contents of these posts included diplomatic activities, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, etc. (see Table 1 and Chart 1). It has been found out

that posts related to political issues account for 70% of the total, followed by those about economic affairs (24%) and culture (6%). As the 16+1 cooperation platform was officially launched in 2012 and institutionalized in 2013-2014, posts that relate to Central and Eastern Europe were also increasing in that period, with most posts about the 16+1 cooperation concentrated in 2013-2014. Subsequently, however, their intensity diminished substantially.
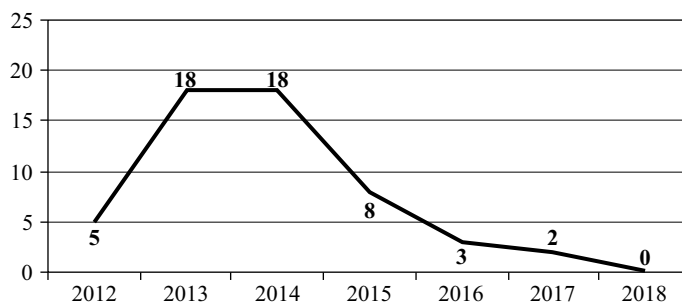

Chart 1. Distribution of posts tagged by the '16+1 cooperation'

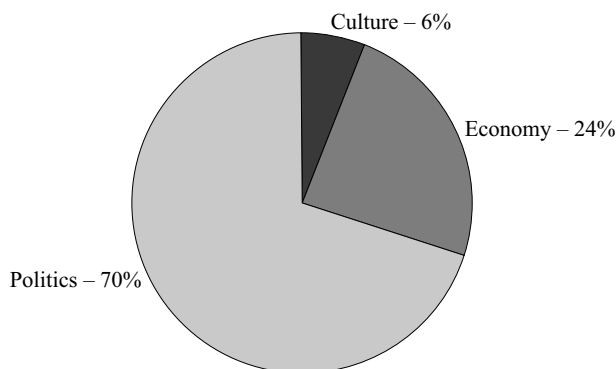Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi' (24th Aug 2012 – 31st Dec 2018).

Chart 2. Distribution of content of posts tagged by '16+1 cooperation'

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi' (24th Aug 2012 – 31st Dec 2018).

Distribution of CEE Sub-Regions and Countries

Generally speaking, the posts' difference in quantity between various CEE regions and countries is relatively obvious. It reveals that the micro-blog publisher has exercised a certain selectivity on the introduction or promotion of different regions and countries instead of distributing the content of each region and country equally.

At the regional level, posts relating to the concept of Central and Eastern Europe account for most of the contents, while the Visegrad Group has been the subject of only one post. At the national level, among the sixteen CEEC, posts about Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary are the top three. Posts related to Montenegro account for least of the contents, with no more than one hundred posts (see Table 1 and Chart 3).

Table 1. The distribution of the CEE region and sub-regions

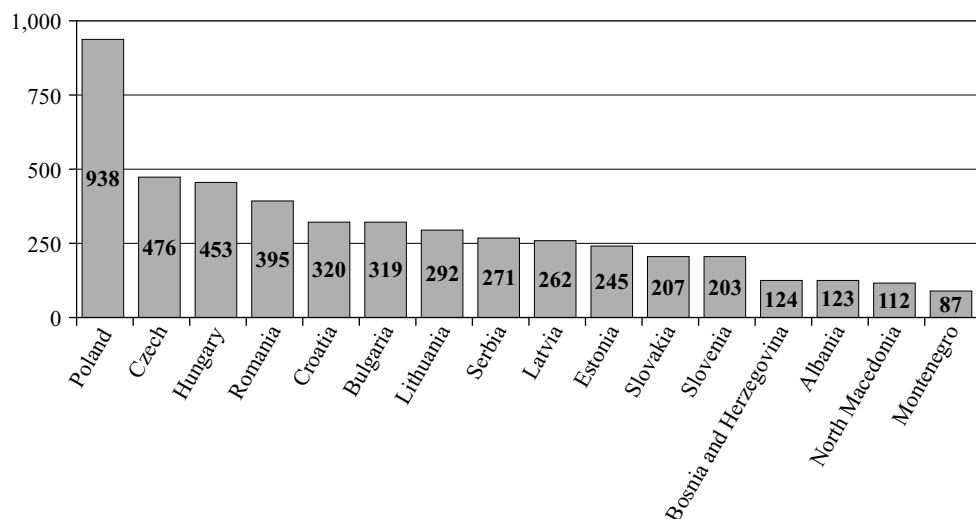| Region	Posts Quantity
Central and Eastern Europe	619
the Baltic Region	136
the Balkans	63
the Visegrad Group	1
Total	**819**

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Chart 3. Distribution of CEEC

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi' (24th Aug 2012 – 31st Dec 2018).

Distribution of Content Sorts

The micro-blog content is also divided into ten categories: bilateral relations, economy, history, culture, society, tourism, gourmet, music, sports, and education. The research finds that the 'bilateral relations' and 'society' categories account for more than 50%,

which is the most common content in this micro-blog. The 'tourism' category ranked third, with 12.31%. The 'education' category, accounting for only 1.54%, is the smallest one (see Chart 4).
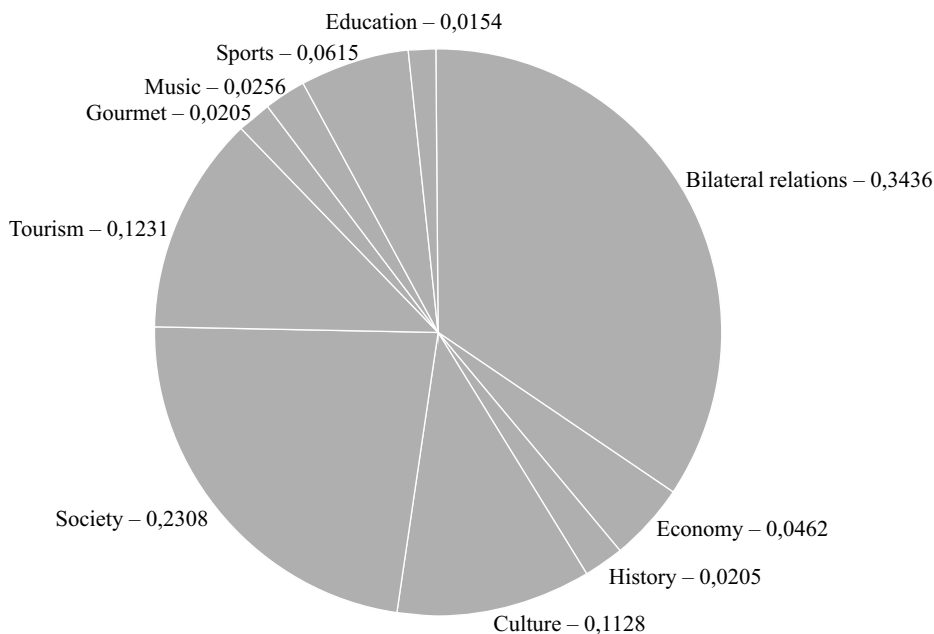

Chart 4. Distribution of content

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi' (24th Aug 2012 – 31st Dec 2018).

Public Reflection

Our research concludes that little evidence of automation was found on Weibo compared with a large amount of automation found on Twitter,[15] which means that the comments on the official political informative posts on Weibo reflect the attitudes of real Chinese netizens. The study of the distribution of reposts and comments as well as 'thumbs up' concerning the content category reveals that the public attention paid to different contents is reflected in the sample of posts mentioned (see Chart 5). It demonstrates that 'sports', which accounts for 6.15% of all, enjoys the highest average number of reposts, comments, and 'thumbs up', followed by 'culture' and 'tourism'. Contrary to expectations, 'bilateral relations', 'economy', and 'history' did not evoke netizens' reactions.

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[15] G. Bolsover and P. Howard, 'Chinese computational propaganda: automation, algorithms and the manipulation of information about Chinese politics on Twitter and Weibo', *Information, Communication & Society*, 2019, Vol. 22, No. 14, pp. 2063-2080.
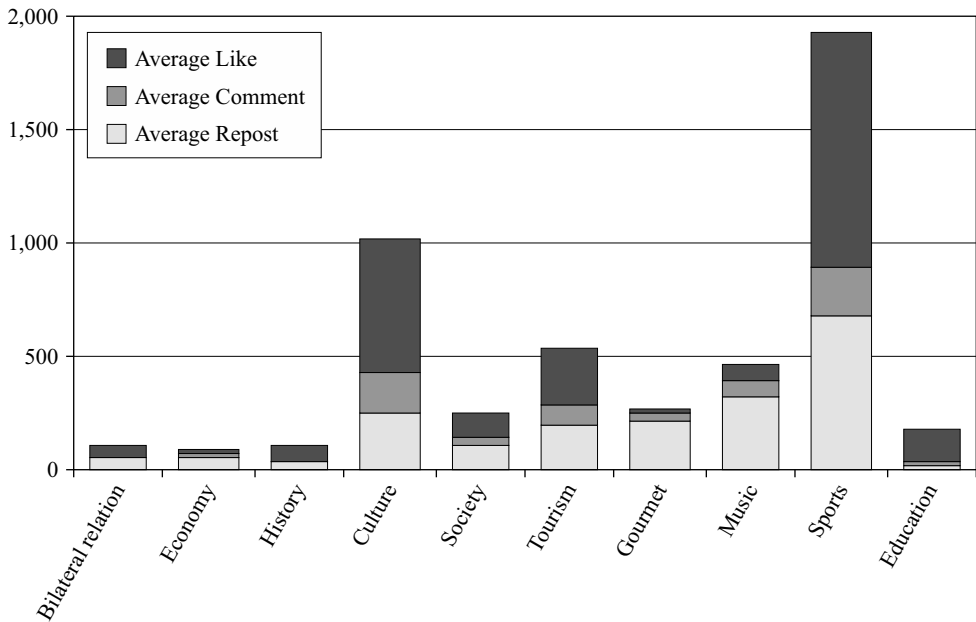
Chart 5. Representation of each content and distribution of reposts, comments, and 'thumbs up'

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Posts Capturing the Greatest Attention

The most important feature of these posts on Central and Eastern Europe is that they are mainly related to bilateral relations between China and Europe.[16] As the following table and word cloud demonstrates, there is much content referring to high-level political and diplomatic fields, e.g. 'Jinjia Pei, the mayor of Xiamen, met with the official China-visiting mission from CEEC'. Moreover, the news titles such as, among others, 'Art team of School of European Language, Beijing Foreign Studies University, performs at the closing ceremony of the Year of China–CEEC People-to-People Exchange', or 'Press corps from CEEC visited Beijing Foreign Studies University' also embody frequent interactions in the field of people-to-people exchanges and cultural communications. Meanwhile, some keywords mentioned in micro-blogs, such as 'piano competition', 'high-speed railways', 'harbor', and 'lignite power plant' – which help learn about the pivotal points of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe – have also attracted netizens' attention (see Table 2 and Chart 6).

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[16]   On this subject, see e.g.: Z. Chen and L. Song, 'The Conceptual Gap on Soft Power between China and Europe and Its Impact on Bilateral Relations', in Z. Pan (ed.), *Conceptual Gaps in China–EU Relations: Global Governance, Human Rights and Strategic Partnerships*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 81-83.

Table 2. Top ten reposted posts on Central and Eastern Europe

Tag	Content Category	Title	Repost	Comment	'thumb up'
None	Music	Chongqing plans to held the 2015 Chopin Youth Piano Competition	449	126	83
Sino–Europe relation	Bilateral relations	China high-speed railways make European friends envious and surprised	56	43	95
China–Greece Year of Marine Cooperation	Bilateral relations	Where is the 'harbor'?	48	13	7
Sino–Europe relations & Walk into Bosnia & Herzegovina	Bilateral relations	Stanari lignite power plant achieved the first place in many aspects	11	1	52
None	Bilateral relations	Jinjia Pei, the mayor of Xiamen, met with the official China-visiting mission from CEEC	6	3	50
Sino–Europe relations	Bilateral relations	Art team of School of European Language, Beijing Foreign Studies University, performs at the closing ceremony of the Year of China–CEEC People-to-People Exchange	9	1	48
Graduation Season	Bilateral relations	Press corps from CEEC visited Beijing Foreign Studies University	7	2	46
Sino–Europe relations	Bilateral relations	Press corps from CEEC visited Beijing Foreign Studies University	3	11	40
Sino–Europe relations	Bilateral relations	World-famous football player Lewandowski becomes the brand ambassador of Huawei	34	4	15
None	Bilateral relations	The official China-visiting mission from CEEC visited the Najiahu Mosque in Yongning county, Yinchuan city	6	11	31
None	Tourism	Impression of Central and Eastern Europe	39	9	0

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Chart 6. Word cloud of top ten posts on Central and Eastern Europe

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Top Ten Posts on Poland

The research finds that it is bilateral music exchanges rather than bilateral political or economic exchanges that account for the majority of posts on contents referring to Poland. Moreover, the high frequency of the word 'Chopin' – the great Polish pianist – and 'Yundi' – the famous Chinese youth pianist – in the word cloud as well as the occurrences of phrases such as the 'Philharmonic Orchestra' and 'Chinese folk song' clearly indicates that 'the music country' is one of the most important elements in building the image of Poland.

Regardless of which piece of news one chooses to consider – be it 'Chongqing plans to held the 2015 Chopin Piano Youth Group Competition', 'Politicians attended Yundi's birthday party and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra presented him with a surprise', or 'Polish artists play Chinese folk song with glass harps' – all these posts reflect a close musical exchange and cooperation between China and Poland, as well as they demonstrate Chinese people's fondness for Polish musicians and their interpretation of Chopin (see Table 3 and Chart 7).

Table 3. Top ten posts on Poland

Tag	Content Category	Title	Repost	Comment	Like
None	Gourmet	Fruit dumplings that cannot float up	829	91	12
China–CEEC Local Leaders' Meeting	Music	Chongqing plans to held the 2015 Chopin Youth Piano Competition	449	126	83
Sino-European relations	Bilateral relations	Polish artists play Chinese folk song 'Colorful Cloud chasing the moon' with glass harps	89	38	499
None	Bilateral relations	What do diplomats do every day?	482	98	5
Sino-European relations	Bilateral relations	Politicians attended YUNDI's birthday party and the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra presented him with a surprise	169	85	297
None	Economy	Poland government carries out preferential policies to help young 'losers' to purchase a house	394	61	7
None	Music	Chinese players march toward the Chopin Piano Competition	257	28	84
Sino-European relations	Education	Chinese and Polish will be the Irish college entrance examination disciplines starting with 2020	26	47	212
None	Bilateral relations	The Polish President praised YUNDI for being young but talented	88	21	68
Sino-European relations	Bilateral relations	The first China–Europe Express between China and Lyon officially opened	94	27	39

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Chart 7. Word cloud of top ten posts on Poland

Source: '@Zhongou Xinshi'.

Discussion

The 5,646 micro-blogs posted by the '@Zhongou Xinshi' from 2012 to 2018 reveal significant differences in various aspects, which means there are choices and concerns in representing the CEE regions, and countries that have close political and economic relations with China are mentioned relatively frequently. The greatest number of posts tagged by the 16+1 cooperation were concentrated in 2013-2014, but subsequently their intensity diminished substantially. One of the reasons is that the comments and 'thumbs up' from the public are very limited, not reaching the expected results of helping the public to better understand the 16+1 cooperation and increase the awareness of Central and Eastern Europe. The difference in importance and relevance of each region or country is dependent on the frequency associated with the posts' quantity. The blogger still pays more attention to the large regional concept of Central and Eastern Europe, while the three CEE sub-regions (Baltic States, the Visegrad Group, and the Balkan countries) are less relevant. This is closely related to China's current foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe. Since the 16+1 cooperation between China and the CEEC was officially launched in 2012, it has been one of the key points for China's economic, trade, and cultural exchanges with Europe, even if the largest share of the Sino–EU

trade and investment flows are concentrated in the Western European countries. Since 2014, the main China–CEE cooperation theme has been set up every year, from the Year of Investment and Economic Promotion and the Year of Tourism Cooperation to the Year of Humanities Exchanges, the Year of Media, and the Year of Local Cooperation. Therefore, it is evident that the breadth and depth of cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries is constantly expanding and deepening. As a result, there has been more quantity of micro-blogs on the Weibo platform with regard to the cooperation between China and Central and Eastern Europe.

Taking into account such differences, the Pearson correlation index was used to analyze the factors that are related to the posts' quantity. The correlation analysis at the national level shows that the number of a country's posts' quantity is highly positively correlated with the country's GDP and bilateral trade volume with China. It also has a moderate positive correlation with the bilateral relationship with China. Thus, when the '@Zhongou Xinshi' presents the CEE countries' images, it often pays more attention to the countries that have closer political or economic relations with China. Generally, countries with relatively close bilateral relations with China have received more attention from the posts; these include strategic partners (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia), but also Hungary with a special relationship with China and Romania and Bulgaria, which all have comprehensive friendly and cooperative partnerships with China. In other words, the quantitative difference of posts concerning CEEC can also indicate that the representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs have a clear tendency to publish specific news about particular countries, because they consider it important for netizens to learn more about – and better understand – those CEEC which have closer political and economic relations with China. However, due to an insufficient political and economic interaction with China, there is less information about small and medium-sized CEEC, especially from the Balkans, as underscored by Chart 3. China and these countries in Central and Eastern Europe need to strengthen their interaction in the future.

There is also an asymmetry between posts about CEE sub-regions and countries. The number of posts regarding the three CEE sub-regions is much smaller than the number concerning individual CEEC. The average posts' quantity of three sub-regions is sixty-six, while the average micro-blog quantity of sixteen CEEC is 301.68, approximately five times as many as the former. As the sub-regions of CEE, the Baltic, Southeastern Europe, and the Visegrad Group are clearly not as well represented and promoted. Hence, the '@Zhongou Xinshi' still places more emphasis on the image of CEEC. It has only one micro-blog indirectly related to the Visegrad Group. In our opinion, this phenomenon is not due to the weakening of the exchanges between China and the Visegrad countries, but, rather, the current emphasis on the China–CEE cooperation platform. China and Visegrad Cooperation is often included in that platform. On the contrary, the four countries of the Visegrad Group – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary – have more obvious national characteristics. The mentioned contents of these four countries cover tourism, bilateral relations, society, sports, etc., which is quite diverse

and multi-dimensional. Therefore, the research finds that the '@Zhongou Xinshi' tends to present more characteristics of CEE countries rather than CEE sub-regions.

In addition to the aforementioned two aspects, from the perspective of time distribution, the '@Zhongou Xinshi' has a clear 'all-time high' and an evident 'all-time low' in presenting CEE regional and national images. The study found out that the time frame from the year 2014 to 2015 represented the peak period, when the '@Zhongou Xinshi' released the highest number of posts about CEEC. Since then, however, the overall posts' quantity has declined. The years 2014 and 2015 represent an important period of cooperation between China and CEEC. The 16+1 cooperation platform was officially launched in 2012 and with the development of the 16+1 cooperation mechanism, posts that concern Central and Eastern Europe also increased. The annual National Coordinators' Meeting between China and CEEC was established as of 2014. Then, in April 2015, the position of Special Representative of Cooperation between China and CEEC was set up. Thus, the posts related to the mechanism also increased, giving netizens more opportunities to understand this region and CEEC.

Among the 195 top ten posts, except fifty-one untagged micro-blogs, the phrasing 'Sino-European relations' appears fifty-eight times. 'European kaleidoscope' and 'travel around Europe' rank second and third respectively. Moreover, there are also some tags for special events, such as the 16+1 cooperation. Although the events are various, like a president of a country visiting China or the Sino–EU Tourism Year, it can be easily seen that, in terms of the topic of content embodied by the tag, the micro-blog publisher also showed a clear tendency: bilateral political and economic exchanges and the cooperation between China and CEEC are the main themes, while cultural exchanges, social news, etc. are not the priority.

Through the data, it can be seen that the content of the '@Zhongou Xinshi' is usually moderate. When it presents a region or a country's image, it often starts from the basic cognition according to the Chinese people, such as the cuisine of the Balkans, Polish musical culture, the well-known tourist destinations: Czech and Hungarian, Bulgarian roses, etc. In the context of the background knowledge familiar to the Chinese people, the '@Zhongou Xinshi' provides more professional knowledge to the public. Besides that, with other countries that the Chinese people are not very familiar with, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or North Macedonia, the micro-blog publisher focused mainly on the content of bilateral relations, often introducing important political and economic cooperation projects between both countries, while the nature and characteristics of the country itself are not involved to a great extent. Therefore, as for the public, by browsing the '@Zhongou Xinshi' they are not able to gain supplementary information on these countries, and still lack knowledge of these countries.

In our opinion, there is still a certain gap between the images that the representatives of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs hope to promote and the images that the audience already has in their minds. In the above-mentioned data analysis, through interactions between the analysis content categories and average number of reposts,

comments, and 'thumbs up', the content category 'bilateral relations' has the largest share among the ten content categories, reaching 34.36%. However, its average number of reposts, comments, and 'thumbs up' only ranks eighth in all distribution of contents. Nevertheless, the content categories of sports, culture, tourism, and entertainment, although they account for a relatively small part, have a very high average popularity. This is explained by the fact that they are closer to Chinese netizens' daily life. The category 'economy' stands in stark contrast; the numbers of both reposts and comments are not high, and the average popularity is also ranked last among the ten categories. Taking a look at the contents of the economic Weibo, one can notice that most of them involve topics such as "Lithuanian wages and pensions are still the lowest in the three Baltic countries", "Poland has introduced preferential policies to help young people to buy a house", or "Europeans can buy a house after working for several years", etc.

The 'bilateral relationships' category has the largest proportion, but the average number of reposts, comments, and 'thumbs up' is comparatively lower. The content of this type of Weibo is mostly about foreign leaders' visits to China, bilateral meetings, ambassadors' visits, etc. It gives more attention to current foreign affairs and its text and terms are more formal and professional than it is the case with the other categories. It is also the focus of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Weibo platform. However, it is clear that the popularity of Weibo is far lower than that of sports, tourism, and culture. In other words, in these more popular micro-blogs, the 'bilateral relationships' category is far less popular than other and more people-friendly topics. In consequence, there is a certain gap between its image-shaping effect and its actual goal, which is to present a more political and economic image of Central and Eastern Europe.

Concluding Remarks

The main findings of this study reveal that the Chinese government constructs the images of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region on three levels, namely the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe, the sub-regions (Baltic countries, the Visegard group, Balkan countries), and the individual sixteen CEEC. There is a certain asymmetry between images of sub-regions and that of countries, as revealed by the quantity of posts. The blogger still pays more attention to the regional concept of Central and Eastern Europe, while the three sub-regions under it are not as relevant as the CEE as a whole. At the same time, information about countries that have closer political or economic relations with China is posted more frequently on the '@Zhongou Xinshi'. Due to an insufficient political and economic interaction with China, there is less information about small and medium-sized CEEC; therefore, China and these countries need to strengthen their interaction in the future.

The present analysis have demonstrated that the peak period was from 2014 to 2015, when the '@Zhongou Xinshi' released the biggest amount of posts about CEEC. Between 2014 and 2015, there was an important period of cooperation between China and CEEC

with the aim of developing the '16+1' platform. The main function of the official micro-blog of the MFA of the PRC is to release important news on China's EU policy and the China–EU relations in a timely way. The Weibo administrators consider that the information about 'bilateral relations' and the economic cooperation can help the general public to better understand the 16+1 cooperation, and increase the awareness of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the average number of reposts, comments, and 'thumbs up' associated with bilateral relations is comparatively lower than the posts about sports, tourism, and culture. There is a certain gap between the image-shaping effect and its actual goal. The official Weibo operators need to consider adopting more efficient information dissemination methods – ones that would focus also on areas of interest relevant to the public – in order to continue attracting netizens' attention. However, given that China's cooperation platform with Central and Eastern Europe has become more mature, the number of Weibo pieces of news on China's view of Central and Eastern Europe cannot grow significantly. Chinese netizens' interest in Central and Eastern Europe has increased, but maintaining their attention to this region is not very easy and requires appropriate instruments.