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Coming From Nowhere: the Chinese Perception of the Concept of Central Europe¹

Introduction

The last few years have witnessed a growing Chinese presence in what can be called Central Europe, demonstrated by, among others, high level visits of Chinese officials; a growth in trade volumes and investments; and (especially) further pledges to invest and increase trade. This is yet another case of the increasing presence of China even in those regions of the world where, traditionally, it had not been involved in any significant extents. However, with the growing global aspirations of China, the situation is changing. While 'Western Europe' has had relations with China for centuries and a similar thing can be said for Russia (thus Eastern Europe), the heart of Europe had been for long time geographically placed in a position in which it was relatively complicated to open relations with the 'Middle Kingdom'. Later on, during the greater part of the 20th century, political and other factors on both sides prevented the relations to flourish.

Therefore, it was not until the beginning of the 21st century when both China and Central Europe were in positions to be able and willing to re-discover each other. Yet, while there may be good potentials for the development of both political and economic ties, both sides carry with them different historical legacies and perceptions that may influence the flourishing of relations.

The presented article will look at the Chinese side to find out what the Chinese perceptions of the Central European region are. Firstly, it will

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present a general overview of the concept of Central Europe as a specific region in the middle of Europe, with its geographical as well as political and ideological aspects. A short discussion on how the different conceptualizations of the region may influence the practical experience of these countries will be included. Secondly, we will look at the Chinese presence in this region, which has been growing significantly in recent years. The goal of this part will be to demonstrate the importance the region holds for the foreign policy of China and to discuss the objective potentials for further development of relations. Subsequently, we will move toward presenting the collected data that presents the Chinese discourse of the targeted region. We will take into account three distinct levels: Chinese official use, general public discourse and Chinese academia.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses will be employed, with the quantitative analysis defining the amount of usage of each term, while the qualitative analysis will compliment the quantitative analysis by differentiating simply between “positive”, “negative” or “neutral” contexts. It is admitted that deciding on the placement of a usage on the positive – negative axis may be subjective and much more scientific rigorosity must be put into this kind of enquiring in order to produce a decisive conclusion. However, the absence of scholarly research on this topic legitimizes our approach whose aim is to attempt to establish the basic position before progressing further in researching the subject.

At the end, the article will answer a relatively straightforward question of what is the Chinese perception of the concept of Central Europe and the region it relates to. By presenting the insights into the Chinese multi-level discourse related to this question, we strive to understand the Chinese opinions about the region; Chinese relations with the region during different historical periods and its legacies; and eventually, the future potentials and obstacles to further development links. We believe that a better understanding of the Chinese point of view should enhance the Central European ability to deal with China in a more effective way, which is eventually of benefit to both sides.

Central Europe: What is it and Where is it?

It has to be made clear that a ‘region’ as such is a theoretical concept and cannot be ‘discovered’ in the real world. Therefore, whatever the regional definition, it would never be purely objective (Neumann 2001; Hettne 2005). Fully agreeing with this, it still makes sense to differenti-

ate between some places based on, primarily, geography, though common history, culture, language, religion, political and economic realities and/or some sense of shared 'regional' identity are important aspects as well.

Not different to situations in other parts of the world, with a good example of the region of 'East Asia' (see Buzanand, Waever 2003), there is an inability to agree on a common understanding of the term Central Europe, which is visible among others in the lack of clear statement about which countries should fall under the term and which should not. The term Central Europe clearly indicates that it should be in the centre, or in the middle of Europe. Therefore, it should border other European regions, such as those of Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern Europe. While all these regions may face difficulties with determining *some* of their borders, the Central European region is unique in that *all* of its borders are shared with other European regions; there is no finite geographical limitation, such as an ocean, thus all of its borders are potentially problematic. In fact, taking a stance on determining Central Europe effectively means setting up the borders of all of the European regions, which is not the case for defining of any other European region. No wonder that even from the theoretical perspective, the term Central Europe is set to pose the biggest difficulty out of all European regions.

There are other problems, however, which are of a more practical importance and these will be well visible after a short example. In February 2009, the Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg argued with his Russian counterpart during a joint press conference in Moscow over whether the Czech Republic and Poland are part of Central or Eastern Europe (see Nosálková 2009; Daniel and Ďurkošová 2012). This somewhat picturesque episode is just a small demonstration of the political meaning of the very term. Timothy Ash (2001) presents more elaborate importance of the term Central Europe, when, according to him, it is largely defined as a unit sharing certain political characteristics such as democracy and rule of law. According to Ash, it may be cultural a tradition that is the basic driving force; yet only the political reality on the ground has the force to change a region from a imaginary one into reality. In practice, during the 1990s when the former communist countries were aspiring to join NATO and EU, it was expected that Central Europe, thus the countries sharing certain political, cultural and social characteristics would be first to join. Hence, being labelled a Central European country can be very helpful.

Let us have a short look at what aspects of a region may be in force when defining Central Europe. Clearly, geographical and topographical ones should be among the first, as a region should make, at the least, a minimal sense from a geographical point of view. This is what Karl A. Sinnhuber already claimed in 1954. Even during his time, he felt confusions about the term and he chose to present the variety of definitions of the region. After examining a number of maps and sources he found that the only pieces of European landmass being part of all of the conceptualizations of Central Europe are modern day Austria and the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the only land in continental Europe not included in any of the sources is the Iberian Peninsula (Sinnhuber 1954, 20). Magocsi (*undated*) looks at the region from more technical aspects and asserts that, geographically speaking, (at the time of his writing) parts of 15 states belong to the Central Europe: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, western Belarus, western Ukraine and Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). He further distinguishes three topographical sub-regions: the northern zone; the Alpine-Carpathian zone; and the Balkan zone. What both authors share, however, is a perceived importance of factors other than geographical which are often critical to the extent of allowing a “region” to expand or disappear entirely.

Applying historical criteria, Central Europe is often presented as a set of countries of former Austria-Hungary. Following this, much of Poland would be exempted while a large portion of the Balkans, northern Italy and Austria would be in. Similarly, and with more emphasis on language and/or ethnic aspects, the extent of the two German empires, Habsburg’s Austria and Prussia/Germany, may be used as the decisive principle to resolve where the region of Central Europe, or *Mitteleuropa*, lays (Curyło 2013, 138; Leoncini 2007). An alternative version from the end of the 19th century may see Central Europe as a region where the Hungarian Empire is the main building constituent.

Contrary to these ‘big powers’ conceptualizations, it appears that the basic standard of being defined *against* the big empires seems to be winning around other countries of the region. This can be regarded as coming from the ideas of Palacký, Masaryk, Piłsudski, Szűcs and others, who perceived Central Europe as a region comprised of small states between the two big countries; Russia in the East and Germany in the West, with both of them posing danger to the region.

Clearly, one has to decide which criteria to put more weight on with regards to the others. With Central Europe, apart from geography, it is foremost the political reality, legacies of different historical eras and a perceived common culture, which are competing for a prevailing definition of regional borders. Yet with a region that has such a turbulent history, it appears that countries can hardly agree on a common understanding of the term. Perhaps this may be one of the causes for inventing the term Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which has become in many ways more than a sufficient equivalent for the contested term Central Europe. However, it should be restated that this term is far from being universally clarified and accepted. To name just a single example, the Polish Central and Eastern European Development Institute (CEED) views CEE as the Visegrad countries (V4), the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia while in the context of 16 CEE countries and China also the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania are included. Similarly, the understanding of the region according to the OECD, KPMG and Roland Bergervary to some extent too.

To sum up, we have to accept that a 'region' is inherently a contested term, no matter what word we bring in and how we conceptualize it. Moreover, Central Europe poses some extra difficulties due to its location and historical legacies, which is also true for Central and Eastern Europe to the extent it actually implies the same geographical region. Finally, the rich political meaning of the term gives us interesting 'material' in understanding how a society tries to make sense of the real world, and thus what patterns it applies to sort out a practice systematically.

The Chinese Presence in Central Europe

Relations between China and Central Europe were for geographical reasons perhaps the least developed in comparison to all of the European regions. Western European countries were for centuries the most powerful maritime nations in the world and they conducted intensive relations with China for a long time. Similarly, the expansion of the Russian Empire, here understood as Eastern Europe, also led to the establishment of early contacts with the 'Middle Kingdom'. In fact, Russia succeeded in maintaining a permanent presence in Beijing, something which Western European powers were fighting for during a large part of the 19th century (Kissinger 2011, 33).

Central Europe's 'golden time' for relations with China came after the communist parties established their rules in the years following the Second World War in both places. In fact, Central European countries were among the first to recognize the People's Republic of China, a fact that is widely remembered and acclaimed in China. However, the intensive relations which followed were soon set to end with emerging political differences between Central Europe (at that time practically part of Eastern Europe) and China. Due to the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations and the eventual split, the Soviet Union asserted its status and basically halted further development of relations between its European satellite countries and China. This being said, in times of emancipation attempts by Poland and Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, China was very attentive and it regarded the motives and goals of the Soviet Union with high suspicions. It has been noted, that the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 was an important factor for the opening of Sino-U.S. contacts a couple of years later. The special position of these countries is demonstrated by the role Romania played in early communications between Chinese and American leaders. In the latter decades of communist rule, the relations between China and Central Europe varied, however, it never achieved a level that one would be able to talk about an actual Chinese 'presence'. The year 1989 and striving to 're-join' the West by basically all of the Central European countries put relations with China aside for the time being, mainly due to the aroused ideological obstacles coming from the democratization efforts and the fact that China remained a communist country.

It was China who roughly from the beginning of the new millennium started increasing its economic presence in many world regions, as part of its 'going out' strategy. This can be regarded as a logical result of the developmental path of China, which has been to a significant level based on export-led growth. This on the other hand produces large trade surpluses and thus generates capital for possible further investing. Hence, China is increasingly becoming the leading investor in the world and is quickly becoming present in all of the regions in the world (European Chamber 2013). Since the Global Financial Crisis began and spread in 2008, Chinese investment activity in some regions has further accelerated, leading some to an assumption that China decided to use the situation as an opportunity to strengthen its position (Hanemann and Rosen 2012).

During recent years, Central Europe (or Central and Eastern Europe, as is most often being labelled by both Chinese and European sources in

this case) has become the region with the highest rise of Chinese presence in the world. When it comes to numbers, trade between China and CEE was basically non-existent just about a decade ago, yet since the year 2000 it has been growing on average more than 30% a year in both directions (Eddy 2012). Similar growth in investments can be tracked, with the growth being extraordinary even in comparison with Chinese investments in other parts of the world. A recent CEED report (Golonka 2012a) claims that during the period between 2004 and 2010, Chinese investment stock was multiplied by 6.8 in Asia, 5.3 in Latin America, 8.6 in North America, 7 at the international level, though in the CEE region it multiplies by more than 18. Yet, it has to be made clear that the low starting point means that even after this rapid increase of the trade and investments in the CEE countries, the total combined amounts equal a single medium-large EU member country in Western Europe. Yet, the actual increase of economic volumes and further pledges show that the Chinese policy is aiming to boost up its presence in the region.

It is sometimes mentioned that Chinese intentions are not communicated enough and little understood in Europe, which leads to a growing perception of threat. In fact, there are some indications about what its intentions may be. The activity of China in Central Europe generally follows *China's EU Policy Paper* from 2003, in which China presents its, mostly positive, opinion on the Eastern enlargement of the EU. More focused on the region in question, a 2013 report entitled *China's Policy toward Central and Eastern European Countries* by the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations name three aspects of their relations with the region: economy, politics and education and culture. It is very explicit in claiming that it is the economy that is at the centre, with the two other aspects playing mainly facilitating roles (Szczudlik-Tatar 2010).

Yet the speech and subsequent initiative of the then prime minister of China Wen Jiabao, who presented in April 2012 his '12 points initiative' can be regarded as the most authoritative. Here China, among others, announces the establishment of a special credit line amounting to 10 billion USD for CEE countries, dedicated for projects aimed especially at the development of the infrastructure, high-tech industry and green economy. Further measures of the initiative aim at promoting, among others, the increase in cooperation, such as the establishment of a China-CEE Secretariat, a support for research projects, scholarships, cultural exchanges, promoting tourism and private investments.

In November 2013, the leaders of the 16 CEE countries and the Chinese Prime Minister met in the latest of what seems to be the annual meetings of this 16+1 platform. The final document in the form of the Bucharest Guidelines (2013) restates some of the provisions from the previous announcements and adds some new and more specific ones. These include the cooperation and support of agriculture exports of the CEE countries to China, opening up of new forums and ad hoc promotional activities in both China and the CEE countries, further elaborating on financial cooperation such as investments into each other's inter-bank bond markets, building railway connections. It was also decided that the year 2014 will be the China-CEE Investment and Business Promotion Year.

It is unclear whether this suffices to clear out possible doubts about the quickly approaching China to the region, which had never experienced dealing with the Middle Kingdom in such intensity. There are slowly emerging tensions in host countries in CEE (and in Europe in general), who warn of the negative effects of Chinese involvement in the region. As the single best example, the case of COVEC in Poland may be used, which put a warning light on the one-sided optimism when it comes to Chinese investment in Europe. Here, a Chinese company acquired a large constructing project at a seemingly too low price, which might have discounted further costs necessary to be included in the European context. In the end, the company withdrew from the project after not receiving any support from the Polish government (see Golonka 2012a, 29–30).

Regarding the question of Chinese motivation, Tamás Matura (2012) asserts that China views Central Europe as a gateway to the EU. A similar conclusion was also presented by Fürst and Pleschová (2010) who find the activities of China in Central Europe consistent with its attempt to foster stronger relations with the small EU member states.

We can safely assert, that the relations between China and Central Europe have been developing rapidly in recent years and especially so since the global crisis erupted. Reasons for this seem to be present on both sides, Central Europeans have a lack of capital and investment especially after Western European countries withdrew their capital; China, on the other hand, feels a need to diversify its investments and this puts Europe in general and Central Europe in particular in relevant positions. As the relations are based on mutually present motivating factors coming from the systemic level, it seems that in the future we can expect this relation growing, unless the international structure undergoes another shift comparable to the Global Financial Crisis.

However, while the systemic factors may create the potential, there still may be some obstacles coming from 'irrational' factors. Indeed, the CEED reports (Golonka 2012a, 2012b) came to this conclusion, that while the economics offer fair opportunities for both China and Central European countries to benefit from growing mutual relations; it is the cultural, social and political reasons that may jeopardize this new partnership. Therefore, a better understanding is needed.

Looking for “Central Europe” in Chinese Discourse: Data

Before we start examining the primary source data collected during this research, it may be useful to establish a starting position by pointing at the historical perceptions China held towards the Central European region and the general Chinese perception of Europe.

When it comes to Europe, China tends to view it in many aspects as a unit of the same sort as the self, that is, a unique civilization. This is thanks to its long history, tradition and culture, which is not present in, for instance, the United States or other world regions for that matter. More recently, Europe is being perceived as a leading soft power and it is being praised for its integration experience and settling historical enmities between its nations. On the other hand, Europe is also viewed as somewhat backward, anti-globalist and not modern (or perhaps too post-modern), unlike the United States, which has been perceived ever since the Chinese opening up in late 1970s as a role model to be followed (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007).

When it comes to the Central European region, due to its geographical position and not always apparent connection to Western Europe, it was often regarded in China as European periphery, if not completely ignored as irrelevant (Bondiguel 2007).

The year 1989 is a significant moment for understanding relations and perceptions of the Central European region in China. Czeslaw Tubilewicz (1997) brings an analysis of press coverage of the transformation process in (East) Central Europe in China and discusses its results and meaning. The author differentiates four periods with somewhat different characteristics. Initially, until early 1989, Chinese press viewed the processes in Hungary and Poland positively, even endorsing calls for elections and a multi-party system. The stance changed dramatically and became unified

in the second half of 1989 after the Tiananmen protests into a criticism of changes happening in Hungary and Poland and labelling them “anti-socialist”. In the period of 1990–1992, after all the Central European countries changed their political systems, Chinese press was on the one hand rationalizing why all this happened, and on the other hand it was bringing pessimistic stories about rapid economic decline and serious transformation problems. This rhetoric remained basically in place even in the fourth period after 1993, yet less dynamic and with some positive comments about stability in some countries. The author concludes that he found the Chinese public being largely persuaded that the transformation of societies after 1989 in Central Europe was riddled with mainly political and economic disasters (Tubilewicz 1997, 942). Also, it is apparent, that the Chinese Communist Party took the events of 1989 in Central Europe seriously as a possible challenge to its rule and it decided to discredit them as negatively as possible to legitimize its own rule in the country.

Chinese official use

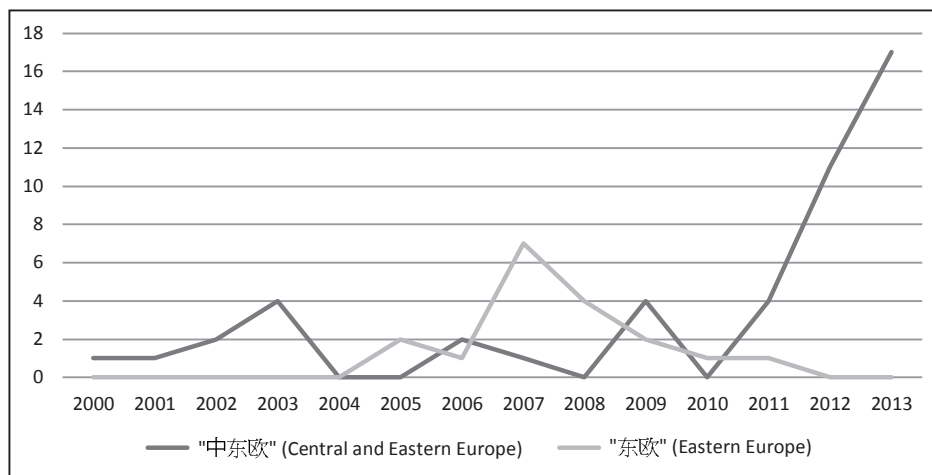
As the single most authoritative media in China, the People’s Daily newspaper serving as the “Party’s mouthpiece” will be the object of our research. We have searched for the terms: “中欧” (Central Europe), “中东欧” (Central and Eastern Europe), and “东欧” (Eastern Europe) in the titles of articles in the Chinese on-line database from the year 2000 to September 2013.

For “中欧” (Central Europe), we found a relatively high number of results, on average about 20 per year, out of which, however, all were to mean Sino-European relations rather than Central Europe. In the Chinese language, the two identical characters that stands for Central Europe also stand for China (‘中’ – centre or middle, meaning the Middle Kingdom) and Europe (‘欧’), and are widely used for describing Sino-European relations in general.

As for the terms ‘中东欧’ (CEE) and ‘东欧’ (Eastern Europe), they both referred to the V4, the Baltic states, Romania, Bulgaria and the Balkan countries. The difference consists of CEE excluding former Soviet Union countries and/or non-members of the EU, while including them in Eastern Europe. For the rest of the countries, the terms intermix according to context. For instance, the Czech Republic is regarded as CEE in the topic of Wen Jiabao’s visit to the region, though labelled as Eastern Europe when

the U.S. missile project is discussed. The topic in use also explains the variations in the frequency. There have been, however, single exceptions, with Ukraine being once or twice noted as a CEE country and so was Austria.

In consistence with the above stated, we can see in the adjusted table that the most (seven) uses of “东欧” (Eastern Europe) in 2007 is the result of the then discussions regarding the plan to build the missile system in the Czech Republic and Poland by the United States, with also some mentions in the following year. On the other hand, the recent upsurge in the use of “中东欧” (Central and Eastern Europe) is clearly a result of the current development of relations between China and CEE, skyrocketing from zero uses in 2010 to four uses in 2011, eleven in 2012 and 17 in 2013. Ups and downs in the use of the word, like the ones in 2009 and 2003, do not have a single reason and the news touches on the visits of politicians, historical milestones and internal issues of the CEE countries.



Graph 1. Frequency: Titles of Articles in the People's Daily

Source: Authors' own data based on People's Daily.

Table 2. List of recent Chinese high level visits in the CEE countries

Date of the visit	Country	Name	Position
June 2004	Poland, Hungary, Romania	Hu Jintao	President
December 2005	Czech Republic	Wen Jiabao	Premier
June 2009	Slovakia	Hu Jintao	President
June 2011	Hungary	Wen Jiabao	Premier
April 2012	Poland	Wen Jiabao	Premier
November 2013	Romania	Li Keqiang	Premier

Source: authors' own data

General public discourse

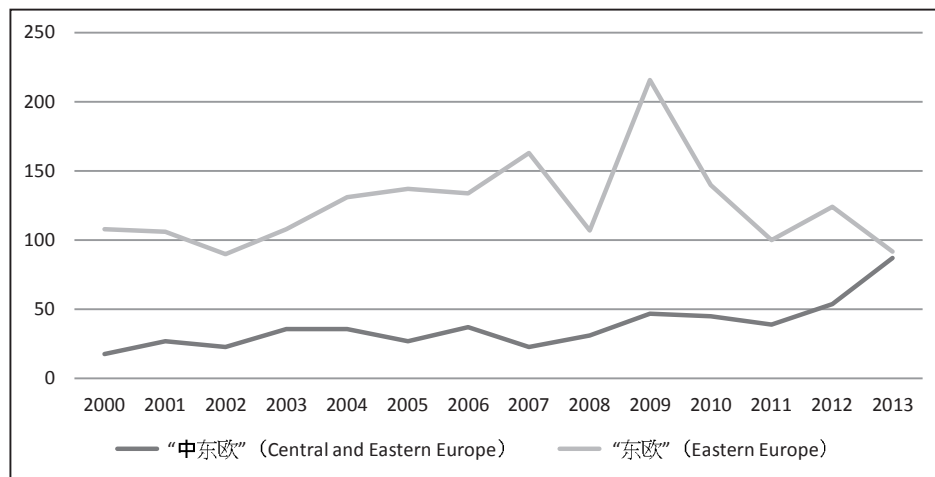
For the Chinese general public discourse analysis we have chosen the most popular Chinese micro blog, SinaWeibo. We conducted research twice for a duration of three days: 1. 10–12 April, 2013; 2. 29–31 May, 2013. In both cases we have searched for three terms: “中欧” (Central Europe), “中东欧” (CEE) and “东欧” (Eastern Europe). In the first case we got 480 hits for “中欧” (Central Europe), out of which, however, only 35 actually referred to the Central European region. All the remaining talked about Sino-European topics. In the second case we got 690 hits for “中欧” (Central Europe), out of which again only 50 talked about Central Europe and the rest referred to Sino-European relations. In these cases, when users referred to the Central European region, the posts were mainly connected to travelling and culture. The countries included enlist the four Visegrad countries, quite regularly Austria, Germany and Switzerland, and less frequently Slovenia and Croatia. Countries of the Balkan and Baltic regions, similarly as Bulgaria and Romania, were rarely mentioned or not at all.

As for the term “中东欧” (CEE), in the first case we got ten hits and in the second only seven. The context in which it was used differed vastly, with people speaking about topics or places such as Vienna, local writers, borsch soup, the Baltic countries, sexual service, unsuccessful transformation and the visit of Bulgarian Prime Minister in a business forum. When “东欧” (Eastern Europe) was searched for, we got about 600 returns in the first round and more than 1,000 in the second round. As for the countries included, in various posts users talked about countries starting in the West from Austria (and sometimes Germany) to the Balkan and Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Russia. The topics were often negative, with some referring to, among others, various sexual contexts (prostitution, pornography), crime, unsuccessful transformation, bad human rights record and xenophobia. More positive posts talked about successful sport teams, nice travel experiences and interesting cultural aspects. In the end, slightly more than half of all of the posts could be regarded as having a negative connotation.

Chinese academia and researchers

Two sources were primarily consulted primarily the research, Chinese language books on Amazon.cn and the comprehensive research database CNKI.net. In both cases we searched for the terms: “中欧” (Central Eu-

rope), “中东欧” (CEE) and “东欧” (Eastern Europe). In Amazon.cn, results brought 188 hits for “中欧” (Central Europe), yet only in a small fraction of them do the books actually refer to the Central European region and in all other cases they were about Sino-European relations, described with the same initial characters. In the few cases talking about the region, they were mostly about travelling (with the Lonely Planet translated book “Central Europe” being one example in a few editions and covering an area that included the Visegrad countries, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Lichtenstein and Slovenia); literature (covering for example Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland); music (folk songs from Hungary, Poland and Romania); history (Germany’s Central Europe aspirations; history of national and ethnic composition in the region).



Graph 2. Frequency: Titles of Articles in CNKI

Source: Authors’ own data based on CNKI database

The term “中东欧” (CEE) brought about 30 results of books dealing with a variety of issues connected to, among others, the transformation, politics, society, culture and relations with China. The region these books referred to were all the post-communist countries in Europe, thus excluding Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Russia and other post-Soviet countries were included only in a limited number of books. Searching for “东欧” (Eastern Europe) gave us approximately 50 hits of books, dealing with issues such as transformation, travelling, history and politics. The countries covered are basically the same as those in CEE, including, for instance Austria in a travelling book the and East German transformation case. CNKI.net is a comprehensive research database including academic

journals, newspapers², and some magazines. There was a large number of returns for “中欧” (Central Europe), yet none meant the Central European region, with the returns all referring to Sino-European relations. As for the frequency of the other two terms, it is quite visible from the table that “中东欧” (CEE) is seemingly catching up with “东欧” (Eastern Europe) and perhaps in the near future we will witness a shift.

Regarding the content, we have noticed that for CEE, the topics range from the introductions to these countries, social problems and transformation analyses and more recently to the relations between the EU (and the CEE as part of it) and China. The term Eastern Europe appears on the other hand in similar ways as CEE, though issues like neo-Marxist ideology and “desperate” economic problems are dealt together with Central Asia. We have not noticed any change of content during this period.

Conclusions

Let us firstly summarize the findings to make better sense in the abundance of data. In the first part, we have presented various conceptualizations of Central Europe as a specific concept of the region in the middle of the Europe. We have seen that the term is quite ambiguous with a number of possible border determinations, depending especially on the chosen non-geographical criteria. In the second part, in which we have focused on the members of the former Eastern bloc, we have discussed the growing Chinese presence in this region, which is driven by mutually present motivating factors: a rising Chinese appetite to invest on one side and the decrease of investment from more ‘traditional’ sources on the other. This, together with the membership of the EU and thus the possibility of serving as a ‘gateway’, make this region increasingly interesting for China.

The Chinese opinion towards the region is to a certain extent influenced by the memory of 1989 and the consequent transformation of the former socialist countries in Europe. This legacy is present especially in the prevailing terms of Eastern Europe and Central and Eastern Europe which are the most typical labels assigned to the region. The former is mostly a popular public term, which also holds a number of negative connotations, starting with unsuccessful transformations and economic

² Here there is a slight overlap with the official use of the term as also authoritative newspapers such as the People’s Daily are included in the database and thus appear in our findings.

disasters, to prostitution and a high level of crime. The latter is mostly preferred and used by academia and officials, while being almost entirely ignored by the wider public discourse, possibly for being too clumsy. While in academia, the issue of transformation and legacy of socialism is to a significant extent present, the official use of the term is predominantly forward-looking and seems to try to cut off the historical legacy. Interestingly, in both cases, the former countries of the Soviet Union are excluded from being CEE and approached as Eastern Europe, with the exception of the Baltic countries, which are sometimes, yet not always, referred to as CEE, which is most likely due to their membership in the EU.

When it comes to Central Europe, perhaps the most eye-opening finding to the European side would be that the term Central Europe (中欧) is in Chinese language already 'taken' for describing Sino-European relations in general, with the first character '中' (meaning middle or centre) standing for China or the Middle Kingdom, and the second character for Europe. However, in those minority cases when the use of these characters is actually meant to be Central Europe, we found that the context is mostly positive and coming for example from a travelling or cultural experience. Moreover, while according to some German speaking countries are included in Central Europe, many define the region as the countries or space in between Germany and Russia, which makes it effectively identical with the understanding of Palacký. In fact, the official Chinese use of CEE comes surprisingly close to this definition of Central Europe.

Our research of the terms referring basically to the same region pre-supposes that these terms have a different political meaning. As a proof that this assumption is at least to some extent correct we can look at the interesting official use of the terms CEE and Eastern Europe. As we found, while the geographical difference is mostly present in excluding former Soviet Union member countries in CEE and including them in Eastern Europe, the rest of the countries may be labelled by both terms, depending on the circumstances. This is an interesting finding as it shows that the Chinese government is perhaps aware of the differences and thus uses the more positive CEE when it comes to business, but Eastern Europe when a politically sensitive issue appears. This may also explain why the public perceives Eastern Europe as a problematic region. Furthermore, Central Europe is completely ignored in official use, mostly ignored by academia, but strives to exist on the margins of public use, especially in positive connotations.

In the end, to answer the research question of what the Chinese perception towards the concept of Central Europe and the region it delineates is, we will take perhaps the unsurprising position that it varies. Yet, the circumstances of these variations are of significant interest as they tend to change according to who uses the term and in what situation. Further research of qualitative content in relevant cases may reveal more about the particular motivation of the government and impact of its policies on the wider public discourse. However, this research shows that the continuity of using CEE and abandoning Eastern Europe is a good first sign and it will be interesting to observe whether CEE will win the hearts of public and become more widely used. While the abandoning of 'Eastern' and the adoption of the new concept of Central Europe would indeed symbolize a real cut off from the problematic historical legacies, this does not seem likely and is further complicated by the language conditions, not considering the problems on the European side with defining the region.

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