Yugoslavia and China

Histories, Legacies, Afterlives

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Chapter 13

From Pericentricity towards Possibilism

Legacies, Afterlives, and *Alterlives* of the Yugo-Chinese Normative Encounters

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From Pericentricity towards Possibilism

Legacies, Afterlives, and *Alterlives* of the Yugo-Chinese Normative Encounters

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If China owes its rise to Yugoslavia, then perhaps it's time for China to help rebuild what was lost – starting with a new Yugoslavia. This, in summary, was the pointed remark from a Croatian scholar at a 2014 China-CESEE conference in Beijing, cutting through the room's usual diplomatic formalities. For the Chinese hosts, such events served to improve their knowledge of post-socialist Europe and to provide tailwind for the agenda of regional cooperation kick-started in 2011–2012, aimed at rekindling old relationships that were broken off by the political changes in the 1990s and early 2000s. While the framework avoided provocative discussion, the scholar's off-script remark, despite causing palpable discomfort, raised an essential point that resonated beyond the formal agenda. Unlike Brussels, Washington, DC, or London, where Yugoslavia is often misinterpreted, including the erroneous stereotype of being a Soviet satellite (Stojanovski 2019), or reduced to the traumas of the 1990s conflicts, in China, one can count on more nuanced reflections on the lost socialist federation, including its intersecting trajectory with China. The scholar's provocative comment sparked such discussions on the sidelines in Beijing, which in retrospect, catalysed my exploration of (post)Yugoslav-Chinese relations.

Studying Yugo-Chinese histories, legacies, and afterlives reveals surreal juxtapositions: a techno-futuristic Global China ambitiously building economic belts and maritime roads powered by state-of-the art technology, against the backdrop of persistent remnants of a shared socialist past. In 2017, during a 300-km-long ride on a Chinese bullet train with fellow Chinese and CESEE scholars, we spontaneously began discussing Tito and Yugoslavia. However, the super-fast train, reaching speed of more than 300 km/h, arrived to the destination long before our conversation even had a chance to unfold (though one could argue that even the

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oldest, slowest train, would have not given us enough time for such discussions). On a different ocassion, at a 2016 BRI-themed conference dinner in Belgrade (that involved discussion, among other things, on construction of technological industrial parks), Chinese diplomats and scholars passionately sang old Yugoslav songs alongside their counterparts from all over the former federation, evoking cultural affinities that transcend simple geopolitical and geoeconomic calculus, reinforcing the impression that the past continues to resemble a bond for a generation of elites and decision makers on both sides well into the 21st century. My own spontaneous exchanges, moreover, have shown that such sentiments are not confined just to China-CESEE and BRI themed events: at a 2024 trade fair in Beijing, where I was among the few foreign attendees, a curious passer-by approached me shortly after I had taken photos with a state-of-the-art humanoid robot, asking me where I was from. "Macedonia" or "Slovenia" did not mean much to him, but once he found out that these have been parts of "Yugoslavia," he exclaimed "China and Yugoslavia, we are brothers!"

"We all miss Yugoslavia," sighed in 2014 a retired Chinese diplomat and senior scholar, talking passionately about Yugoslavia's symbolic value for the generations coming of age in the 1980s. In 2017, another senior scholar in Beijing, alumni of the 1980s exchanges, shared that Yugoslavia's dissolution, even though strategically less significant for China, caused much deeper emotional trauma than the fall of the USSR, because of the strong bonds formed between Chinese and Yugoslavs during the 1980s, in contrast to the history of Sino-Soviet friction. Chinese people in the 1970s, as a third senior scholar recounted during a meeting in Beijing in 2024, "knew only of three countries in the world": US, Japan, and Yugoslavia. "I am glad to meet you (and learn about your book), because I am a Yugonostalgic," they messaged me over WeChat, the Chinese super-app and symbol of China's rise as technological power, after our conversation.

* * *

These anecdotes and countless similar experiences of contemporary (post) Yugoslav-Chinese interactions have grounded my own positionality in studying Yugo-Chinese relations, revealing how the past is not just an object of analysis, but something lived, invoked, and negotiated in real time. Often, I have not been alone in this – fellow researchers, including contributors to this volume, both post-Yugoslav, Chinese and others, have been integral part of these experiences. And the works in this volume, perhaps co-shaped by similar experiences, whether through fieldwork, archival research, or analysis of contemporary relations – all point to the capacity of the past to unfold in multiple temporalities at once, moving beyond mere persistence of history towards its reactivation, repurposing, and reimagination, often in ways that elude historical actors themselves and unsettle contemporary ones. The Yugo-Chinese past thus remains a living matter, shaping expectations, possibilities, and constraints in the present, pushing us to contemplate beyond *presentist* (and largely Eurocentric)

paradigms, to some extent, serving as a welcome (and even necessary) detour as we move towards the future. As such, the past does not simply return nor stay, but reconfigures itself, resurfacing in fragments, reassembled in new contexts, and made visible and legible through contemporary struggles over meanings and interpretations of historical trajectories – shaping the present, and even more importantly, the future. Discussing Yugo-Chinese pasts today is, therefore, not about nostalgia or symbolic recognition, but rather about the dialectics of continuity and rupture that has shaped the evolution of Yugo-Chinese (and post-Yugo-Chinese) relations in a global context, that transcends both historical romanticism and present-day pragmatism. Engaging with that topic, means moving beyond the immediacy of present, unearthing forgotten memories, tracing the systemic forces that have shaped and reshaped (post)-Yugo-Chinese linkages over time, and, ultimately, unlocking the capacity to think beyond the established mainstream frameworks of today.

To that end, this book has brought together different histories of Yugo-Chinese relations, extending out to the present-day relations between China and the Yugoslav successor states. The geopolitical *pas de deux* between Yugoslavia and China during the Cold War played out not only in communist power corridors but across the Global South and beyond (Čavoški 2025), intensifying during the critical junctures of 1948, 1958, and 1968 (Stopić 2025), which gave *maieutic* properties to the geopolitical concept of Yugoslavia – *nansilafu* – in the Chinese socialist worldmaking (Bakota 2025). Paradigm-shifting Yugo-Chinese people-to-people exchanges proliferated for three intense years in the 1950s (Bogojević 2025); after a period of isolation, they were restarted and experienced a sort of a "Golden Age" in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Zhou 2025). To say that this second wave of exchanges were instrumental in China's early reform would be an understatement; they laid foundational groundwork, shaping the direction and substance of reform policies at a critical juncture in China's transformation (Pavlićević and Milić 2025). Later on, negative lessons of Yugoslavia's crises and dissolution shaped China's revert to political centralism, and its cautious, stability-oriented post-1989 (and post-1991) worldview (Brusadelli 2025).

The ideational crosscurrents from the 1930s until the late 1980s form a cycle of Yugo-Chinese ideational exchange that has left deep historical imprint and is relevant until the present day. Experiences of (former) socialist countries have served as core learning material for the CPC (Marsh 2003; Shambaugh 2009). In fact, while Yugoslavia and its fall have been extensively studied from various scholarly perspectives around the world, perhaps nowhere have they been scrutinised as closely for practical policy lessons as in China, shaping China's worldview and trajectory. Yugoslav ideas and principles, particularly associated with the pursuit of independent, out-of-the-box, non-Soviet socialism, left a distinctive mark on China's policies and worldview. The downfall of Yugoslavia, on the other hand – aside from the emotional appeal – presented the CPC with an analytical challenge: while the end of the USSR could be ascribed to its outdated model and Gorbachev's mistakes, Yugoslavia's quick decay from exemplary market socialism and brotherhood and unity, to

crisis, and then to bloodshed deeply "shook" Chinese leaders and required more serious analysis (Marsh and Gvosdev 2006).

Today, China's approach to the different countries is partially shaped by the variegated legacy of Yugoslavia (Peng and Xu 2025). Yugoslav successor states try to attract Chinese capital and their companies find new purpose once acquired by Chinese multinationals, like Gorenje which has been taken over by Hisense (Rogelja and Bofulin 2025). On the other hand, Chinese investments in former Yugoslavia, which echo Yugo-Chinese past explorations of economic cooperation, raise difficult questions on the trade-offs between economic growth and sustainability (Ren 2025). The past is a potentially significant resource for attracting Chinese "red tourists" who visit the Yugoslav successor states, themselves often caught off guard by the fragmentation of the former Yugoslav space and the conflicting interpretations of Yugoslavia's heritage (Talmacs 2025). Yet, some countries, and Serbia in particular, try to instrumentalise "Sino-Yugo-nostalgia" in forging closer political relations with China, often resorting to mythologisation of the past (Gledić 2025). Here, the irony is that often, "Sino-Yugo-nostalgic" narratives are also instrumentalised by post-Yugoslav elites who are anti-socialist and nationalist, and otherwise seek to erase all other remnants of the Yugoslav past.

Building upon the knowledge produced in the preceding book chapters, and doubling down on the idea of pericentricity that underpins this book – i.e. an analytical focus that shifts away from great power centrism to emphasise the agency, perspectives, and interconnected histories of (semi)peripheral actors – this concluding chapter explores how reconfiguring (post)Yugo-Chinese relationships and historical legacies illuminate and complicate global quests of reimagining development in the contemporary era of constant flux. To that end, the chapter first situates Yugo-Chinese normative encounters in their historical contexts, from the long cycle of shared socialist history 1930s–late 1980s to the reality check of the "end of history" unipolar era 1991–2008, and into the era of Global China in the aftermath of the global financial crisis (GFC) (2009–today). In the second part, the chapter extends critical insights from the historical encounters to the present and future, modestly contemplating Yugo-Chinese *alterlives*[1] that intersect with regional, and global debates on the interplay between globalisation and sovereignty, modes of economic development, and the quest for peace and stability. Ultimately, the chapter posits that the lessons CPC learned from Yugoslavia's successes and failures (and those it did not) have shaped its trajectory, now coming full circle as a confident and strategically minded China returns to a former Yugoslavia diminished in stature and self-confidence amidst the lethargy of transitions without closures (Jović, 2022).

Yugoslav-Chinese Normative Encounters

The term *Yugoslav-Chinese normative encounters* refers to the dialectical interplay of ideas, narratives, and political discourses that stemmed from the often contingent interactions between China and Yugoslavia, two distinct and physically distant socialist projects with their own idiosyncratic paths and

strategies.[2] These encounters, emerging without predetermined necessity, led to a sense of shared purpose in the search for a worthwhile socialist model of development[3] that could balance ideological commitments with geopolitical and economic adaptability. They unfolded not only through high politics, official discourse pamphleteering, or diplomatic posturing, but also through direct "people to people" exchanges, i.e. study visits, institutional cooperation, and personal relationships between party cadres, economists, workers, students, cultural envoys, and professionals from all walks of life. This multifaceted engagement helped generate novel, out-of-the-box approaches towards development and international cooperation. Altogether, the normative encounters comprised an asymmetric process of learning and diffusion (in the sense that China learned much more from Yugoslavia than vice versa), and at times, and equally importantly, ideological and strategic differentiation, and tension, revolving around the question, what kind of socialism is appropriate in a deeply uncertain world?

While the Yugoslav quest for socialism reached its end with the dissolution of the federation (or, as critics would say, Yugoslavia effectively self-destructed as soon as it gave up on its socialist project), China continues to build "socialism with Chinese characteristics" until the present day, although the socialist character of contemporary China has been consistently questioned (Westra 2023), often called by other names, such as "political capitalism" (Milanović 2019). However, with Yugoslavia gone and Yugoslav successor states having actively dismantled, discredited, or disregarded Yugoslav ideational heritage (that is, the heritage of the idea of Yugoslavia and the ideology of socialism), China – regardless if we classify it as socialist or not – remains the primary custodian of the institutional memory of the Yugo-Chinese socialist ideational interaction.

Importantly, the socialist past, despite formally denounced, is still a core element of the political culture of all post-socialist countries, and a powerful force shaping geopolitical sentiments and attitudes (Gries and Turcsányi 2022). The same holds true in former Yugoslavia. Notably, in the former Yugoslav space, despite strong top-down anti-socialist rhetoric, there is still widespread questioning of historic choices, and the enduring belief among non-negligible parts of the population of all post-Yugoslav countries that the countries and people of former Yugoslavia have been worse off after the dissolution of the socialist federation (Korchnak 2020). Those who espouse *Yugonostlagic* views – not towards the actual, historic, Yugoslavia, but rather towards an idealistic, imagined version of what Yugoslavia could have been (Maksimović 2017; Petrović 2013; Velikonja 2011) – find unlikely interlocutors in China, where the memory of Yugoslavia lives on and helps shape the approach towards the post-Yugoslav region (Vangeli 2023).

The historic Yugo-Chinese normative encounters, taking place "amid the vicissitudes" of the Cold War era (Pirjevec, 2023), taken as somewhat of an ideational cascade, or rather an ideational nexus developing over several decades, stood as an antipode to deterministic views of geopolitical and historical inevitability: Yugoslavia and China embodied a rejection of the bipolar order, bloc politics, Soviet monopoly over state socialism and reductionist

interpretations of Marxism. Normatively, this was underpinned by bold, experimental, and agile approach to geopolitics and development, in many ways reflecting "possibilism" in Hirschmanian sense, i.e. an adaptive, possibility-oriented approach towards the future, not necessarily seen through a lens of optimism or utopianism, and especially not through lens of teleology, but rather through one of open-endedness (Hirschman 2013; Lepenies 2008).

The non-teleological, possibilistic exchange between Yugoslavia and China had tremendous impacts on political strategies, institutional design, economic policy, capital flows, and strategic (re)alignments. Partisans' revolutions, saying "no" to Stalin, reaching out to the decolonising world, pursuing socialist market experiments, and crisis and decay – these are, among other things, the possibilistic themes weaved together in the Yugo-Chinese nexus. On the other hand, in the contemporary setting, Global China has re-entered the hope-starved and imagination-deprived "desert of post-socialist transition" (Horvat and Štiks 2012). Within the framework of the New Silk Roads, China has projected phantasmatic visions and imaginaries of economic development, offering an alternative narrative to the stalled transitions of the region (Fister and Brglez 2021), while subtly nodding to the shared socialist past (Vangeli 2022a).

Importantly, by looking at (post)Yugo-Chinese intersections from a pericentric perspective, this chapter remains aware about certain limitations of their impacts. Physical distance has ensured that Yugoslavia and China remained culturally foreign to each other causing communication glitches (see Bogojević, 2025; Zhou, 2025). Centrality of "socialist worldmaking" (Stopić 2023) notwithstanding, the language of ideas Yugoslavs and Chinese spoke also had a *realpolitik* function when balancing against the great powers or competing in the Global South. While mutually influential, China and Yugoslavia also looked elsewhere for exchange and inspiration. In its contemporary relations with the Yugoslav successor states, China avoids positioning itself as a hegemonand strives to maintain an image of equal partnership; however, the sheer asymmetry in resources and impact reinforces perceptions of lopsided power dynamics. Taking these limits into account, however, does not reduce the significance of the (post)Yugo-Chinese normative encounters in a global context, nor their potential to illuminate possibilities and contradictions of pericentric agency.

Intersecting Socialist Paths

The initial, indirect, Yugo-Chinese ideational exchanges, including through Soviet intermediaries, could be traced to the interwar 1930s; subsequently, during World War II, in the 1940s, Yugoslav partisans took the People's Liberation Army (PLA) as one of its key sources of inspiration (Pirjevec 2023). Yugoslav references to the Chinese revolutionary experience were more than symbolic, and mattered well beyond the military strategy domain: echoing the Chinese revolution and its iconic episodes such as the Long March (Dedijer 1990) inspired Yugoslav partisans to diverge from strategic blueprints designed in Moscow. Like their Chinese comrades, the Yugoslav partisans pursued a pan-Yugoslav

people's (as opposed to ethnonational), countryside-based (as opposed to urban), socialist (as opposed to "united front") *revolution* (as opposed to ethnonational "telluric" liberation [see Kirn, 2023]). In a global context, these Yugoslav and Chinese "partisan ruptures" brought about profoundly transformative consequences, whose mutual resonance – as well as their resonance with other revolutionary and anti-colonial movements after the Second World War made them part of a global "revolutionary process" (Kirn 2023).

Consequently, this led to significant resemblances of the Chinese and Yugoslav body politic and outlook on the world (Kirchner Reill 2014), recognised by their respective leaders. Yugoslavs strongly supported and identified with the Chinese communist struggle for "self-liberation" during the Chinese Civil War; after 1949, while splitting from Stalin, Yugoslavia continued to praise China's revolution (Stopić, Niebuhr, and Pickus 2025). Chinese leaders, notwithstanding geopolitical rifts, acknowledged Yugoslavs' maverick approach in global affairs and the boldness to stand up for themselves (Mojsov 2007). Referring to the proximity between the Yugoslav and Chinese dispositions, Mao Zedong, at the 1957 International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow, amidst an ideological confrontation, told the Yugoslav delegation that "[y]ou [Yugoslavs] differ from us [Chinese] only in the fact that you have moustaches and we don't" (Kardelj 1982, 139–140). The parallels between Yugoslav and Chinese revolutions remained to be a common trope in Sino-Yugoslav interactions even during periods of rivalry, fostering an underlying sense of mutual respect despite persistent animosities. Yugoslavia supported China during key moments (e.g. in Beijing's bid to return to the UN), despite ideological misgivings and treating China with a dose of hubris.

With regards to the Cold War-era relations, the most important takeaway from this book – in dialogue with the recent literature – is that Yugoslavia has been one of the key reference points for China and its world-making (Bakota, 2025). The Yugo-Soviet split of 1948 was a formative experience that had a particular impact on China's trajectory, pushing China to "lean on one side" and align with the USSR despite misgivings, with Mao trying to avoid being stigmatised as "Asian Tito" in the 1950s (Y. Li 2023; Liang 2023). Yet, Yugoslavia's "exit" from the Eastern Bloc also set the precedent for China's own split from the Soviet Union in the 1960s (Stopić, 2025). Likewise, the landmark Yugoslav decisions to embrace "own path of socialism" in 1958 and to advance "peaceful co-existence" in 1968, even if fervently challenged by Beijing at the time when they occurred, later on, paved the way for China's own independent pursuit of socialism and eventual rapprochement with the West that defined its post-1978 trajectory (Stopić, 2025). The competition with Yugoslavia, furthermore, shaped China's engagement with the Global South, and its own version of non-alignment (Čavoški 2021; Stopić, Niebuhr, and Pickus 2021). Ultimately, the example of Yugoslavia encouraged Chinese planners and intellectuals to think outside of the box of dogmatism and teleology, as they embarked on the path of reform, well covered in this book (Zhou, 2025; Pavlićević and Milić, 2025). Later on, Yugoslavia's crisis and fall inspired the

shift towards centralism, as the CPC sought to avoid repeating Yugoslavia's mistakes (Brusadelli, 2025).

China also mattered for the Yugoslav ideological development, both through the dynamics of strategic competition and mutual inspiration. For instance, the support for and identification with China's revolution was of fundamental importance for the formation of the Yugoslav exceptional identity as self-liberated socialist nation, diverging from Soviet blueprint long before the Tito-Stalin split, and immediately after the split, Yugoslavia's strong support for China remained its key anchor within the broader socialist commonwealth (Stopić, Niebuhr, and Pickus 2025). After diverging ideologically, however, the Yugoslav platform for non-alignment and peaceful co-existence was crafted as a counterpoint to Mao's calls for violent world-wide revolution (Stopić 2023). Yet, Mao's style of purging deviant party elites, shaking up an ossified bureaucracy, and pursuing radical decentralisation resonated well with Tito's own thinking and practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, although Tito did not go nearly as far as to fully replicate the Cultural Revolution (Klinger and Kuljis 2021). And during the numerous exchanges in late 1970s and early 1980s, just like their Chinese counterparts studying Yugoslavia, Yugoslav participants have been also taking notes about political and social organisation in China (Zhou, 2025), although it is impossible to assess the extent to which this knowledge played a role in Yugoslav policy-making.

At a crossroads during the reform era, China's top reformers were the main demographic that actively engaged in learning from Yugoslavia (Pavlićević and Milić, 2025), but non-elites and non-conformists were also drawn to Yugoslavia, often beneath the radar of official narratives. Yugoslavia symbolised defiance, inspiring the idealistic segments of China's society in the 1980s.[4] There is, however, little evidence of overt pro-Yugoslav attitudes in the revolutionary social currents and student movements that challenged the CPC, compared to, for instance, the well-known fascination of Tiananmen Square protesters with the Soviet reformist Gorbachev, whose visit to Beijing in 1989 turned into a fiasco for the CPC leadership.

Nevertheless, in a damning speech, Deng Xiaoping singled out "Yugoslav liberalism" as the first in a group of negative external influences (followed by the Polish, Hungarian, and Soviet variants) as the Tiananmen protests were approaching a boiling point in late April 1989 (Deng and Lin 1989). After the crackdown on protesters on 4 June, as LCY expressed "great concern and regret" and the critical reactions of the Yugoslav public and media echoed in the global press, China relegated "liberal" Yugoslavia (together with Hungary and Poland) into the second-worst category of "moderately critical" countries towards China (Vámos 2015), making the final ideological rift between China and SFRY. In an ironic twist of fate, Li Peng, the chief architect of the Tiananmen crackdown, was presented with the Order of the Yugoslav Star during his 2000 visit to FRY in the capacity of Chairman of the National People's Congress (B92 2000), in gratitude for China's support for FRY during the 1999 NATO intervention, making Li the only Chinese dignitary to ever receive it.

Facing the Unipolar World

As Yugoslavia was dissolving during the early 1990s, China entered a period of soul-searching, re-evaluating the lessons from failed socialist systems, all while assuming a low profile on the international stage. During the Yugoslav wars 1992–1995, China, as a UNSC permanent member actively participated in the international endeavours to end the conflict (Peter and Houghton 2024). By 1995, China had established relations with all Yugoslav successor states, but FRY emerged as its closest partner in the region. Institutional continuity notwithstanding (Peng and Xu, 2025), Slobodan Milošević and especially his wife Mirjana Marković, an admirer of China (LeBor 2012, 264), and her party, the Yugoslav United Left, paid special attention to the relations with Beijing amid brewing Kosovo tensions and increasing international isolation.

Through cooperation with the embattled FRY, China reckoned with a fledging unipolar world, especially during the 1998 Kosovo War and the 1999 NATO military intervention. By then, China had adopted a hard-line stance on secession, informed partly by lessons from Yugoslavia's dissolution (Bursadelli, 2025). While initially paying limited attention to Kosovo, the 1998 insurgency and the removal of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) from the list of terrorist organisations and its recasting as a freedom-fighting organisation by the West, led to China reinterpreting the Kosovo situation through the lens of foreign interference (Rath 2000; Sakaguchi and Mayama 2002); this would leave a lasting imprint of how China would interpret such situations in the future. As the West launched new sanctions against FRY, China provided FRY economic assistance, helping to partially offset negative economic effects. Behind the scenes, however, Chinese diplomats criticised FRY's outstanding debts, but they found themselves compelled to maintain support, grounded in commitment to core normative principles and security concerns.[5]

As NATO started its military intervention against FRY in March 1999, China denounced it as act of "barbarism" and "openly and brutally" stomping on the UN Charter and international norms (Rath 2000). However, the Chinese embassy bombing in Belgrade on 7 May 1999 was a landmark event that jolted China's strategic and military elites, intensifying fears about potential American attacks on China, and prompting a thorough recalibration of China's national security paradigm (Doshi 2021). It also provoked the largest and most significant protests in China since 1989 (Wasserstrom 1999), as angered Chinese public pressured the CPC to react. The US officially claimed that the bombing was an accident, for which it apologised and compensated the Chinese side; China never accepted the US version of events (Krstinovska 2022).

Discursive pathos regarding the shared sense of injustice aside (Gledić, 2025), China remained highly pragmatic in dealing with FRY. After the ousting of Milošević in October 2000, China promptly recognised the victory by Vojislav Koštunica and rejected entry to Slobodan Milošević's and Mirjana Marković's son, Marko, as he fled FRY (Troy 2000). In the perspective of Chinese scholars, Chinese leaders saw the Milošević case as a lesson of what happens to a leader who, Western intervention notwithstanding, ultimately lost the support of his people.[6]

Finally, in 2000 China had another reckoning in the former Yugoslav space when Macedonia unexpectedly recognised Taiwan in return for promised investments that ultimately failed to materialise (Tubilewicz 2007). In response, China used its veto right in the UN Security Council, only for the second time ever, regarding the extension of the mandate of UNPREDEP, establishing a pattern in dealing with diplomatic defiance regarding the One China policy (Wuthnow 2012). Following Macedonia's 2001 conflict and a government change in 2002, ties with Beijing were restored as Macedonia revoked its recognition of Taiwan. China's reaction had likely offset potential turn towards Taiwan elsewhere in CESEE, including in Slovenia (Istenič 2008).

After the Global Financial Crisis

Ever since 1989, China sought ways to rebuild "the bridges" to countries that had abolished state socialism (Wasserstrom 2000). The Budapest and Bucharest principles in the 1990s and 2000s, landmark documents issued by China promoting the principle that countries have the right to make sovereign choices about their political models, helped set ideological differences between Beijing and post-socialist countries aside; Cold War-era relations were reframed to emphasise "traditional friendship" without references to ideology (Peng and Xu, 2025). However, it was not until the 2008–2009 global financial crisis (GFC) that China-CESEE, including post-Yugoslav-Chinese relations really took off, gaining further impetus under the BRI framework as of 2013.

The shared predicament of the ex-Yugoslav countries of increasing dependence on increasingly unavailable foreign capital, led to a warming-up towards China, even as post-Yugoslav states have maintained a pro-Western strategic orientation, including Serbia's "multi-vectoral" variant. China itself used the post-crisis context of lack of financial liquidity and societal hope in Europe, to not only rebuild relations with former Yugoslavia (and all of CESEE, and, for that matter, dozens of countries worldwide), but to take them to an unprecedently high level, while also seeing CESEE, in particular, as a learning laboratory of its global initiatives (Vangeli 2022a). Former Yugoslavia gained global visibility as a space of "Chinese influence" as Xi Jinping visited Belgrade in June 2016, exactly 30 years after his father Xi Zhongxun, one of the "elders" of the CPC and key reformer, had been welcomed as a guest of honour to the 13th LCY congress in Belgrade in June 1986. From then on, cooperation had intensified, to the dismay of (pro)Western stakeholders and observers.

Contemporary Relevance of the Yugo-Chinese Normative Encounters

Contemporary post-Yugoslav–Chinese relations unfold through recursive entanglements, where fragments of past normative encounters resurface, and are *remixed* and embedded in the strategic conundrums of the present. The historic Yugo-Chinese normative encounters reverberate through three inter-related *contradictions* shaping post-Yugoslav-Chinese relations today: (1) the contradiction between global integration and national sovereignty, (2) the

trade-offs between speed and quality of economic development, and (3) the quest for peace and/or stability amid geopolitical uncertainty. China's contemporary stance on such matters carries lessons learned from its interaction with and reflections on Yugoslavia, as it encounters the structural realities of Yugoslav successor states, themselves shaped by the legacies of Yugoslav era, Yugoslavia's breakup, and the post-Yugoslav transitions (Jović, 2022).

Globalisation and Sovereignty

Dani Rodrik (2011) has famously posited that in the contemporary world economy, governments can achieve maximum two out of the three core prerogatives at a given time: (1) integrate in the global economy, (2) protect national sovereignty, or (3) advance democracy. Rodrik's model has withstood empirical tests despite global political and economic seismic shifts (Funke and Zhong 2024). The Chinese planners and their brain trusts, however, considered matters pertinent to this "trilemma" long before it was formulated as such, not least by referencing Yugoslavia's own predicaments over balancing socialist ideals, economic openness, and political decentralisation that reflected similar tensions between sovereignty, integration, and governance (Svetličič 2021). As Zhang Weiwei (Biele Nansilafu [Goodbye Yugoslavia] 2021), one of the most influential Chinese public intellectuals, puts it during an episode of his TV show *This Is China* devoted to Yugoslavia, China has risen by pursuing economic globalisation, while rejecting political globalisation (i.e. the global spread of liberal democracy). In the Chinese perspective, Yugoslavia's "political opening up" backfired: democratisation empowered nationalists, ultimately resulting in the federation's breakup (Marsh and Gvosdev 2006).

Historically, China "owes" (Wiedemann 1986) to Yugoslavia the idea that it can forge an own, experimental, irreverent but sovereign path as a socialist country integrated in global capitalism, with certain caveats: for instance, China also learned from Yugoslavia not to get too dependent on foreign capital, and in particular not to get addicted to foreign loans and development aid (Pavlićević and Milić, 2025), which could compromise sovereignty. Yugoslavia taught China that socio-cultural "opening up" that inevitably comes with the economic one must be even more carefully managed, in order to preserve national sovereignty ["keep the windows open but don't forget the mosquito screen" (Rodrik 2011, 138)]. Zhang (Biele Nansilafu 2021) further notes that in the 1980s the Yugoslav society had become "excessively open," as Western liberal values were superimposed over the autochthonous anti-fascist, socialist ones ("red culture" and "revolutionary culture"); losing its "cultural self-confidence," Yugoslavia traded its fabled independent socialist path for essentially a "Western" path of development, to its own detriment.

Such argumentation serves to justify policy choices CPC made at the critical juncture of 1989 (O'Mahoney and Wang 2014), and continuously up until today, in entrenching CPC's rule, ensuring that while further integrating economically, China would never Westernise. Under Xi Jinping, China has

advanced the concept of "two integrations" of Marxist thought in China: first, the practical application and adaptation of Marxism to China's lived realities; and second, the integration of Marxism with China's invoked traditional culture and its officially narrated ancient history (Boer 2021). By fusing Marxism with tradition, CPC seeks to avoid the fate of LCY (as well as CPSU), who intellectualised and embourgeoised Marxism, while framing traditional culture and other "forces of the past" as backward and antithetical to progress (Jović 2013) – ultimately, leading to erosion of ideological commitments and popular legitimacy.

Building on the same principle of dialectically synthesising contradictions, China sees global economic integration as means to strengthen national sovereignty, remaining ostensibly mute on liberal democracy. On the global stage advocates for "inclusive" form of economic globalisation "open to all" countries, without discrimination based on socio-cultural and political-institutional features of state (Liu and Dunford 2016), and with full guarantee of their sovereignty, reflecting the "five principles of peaceful co-existence" echoing lessons learned from Yugoslavia (Stopić, 2023, 2025). China's "wisdom" offered to others through the BRI, and the Global Development, Security and Civilisation Initiatives (GDI, GSI, GCI), or forums such as BRICS+ is centred on the synthesis of economic opening with retaining national "policy rights" to pursue development and integrate economically on one's own terms (X. Li, Brødsgaard, and Jacobsen 2010). Such ideas resonate with audiences in the Global South, which once Yugoslavia aspired to lead. However, "Chinese wisdom" is also appealing for a diverse set of conservative actors globally, including Western right-wing populists (E. X. Li 2017).

Yugoslav successor states have internalised the European (and broadly said, Western) understanding of the globalisation trilemma, absorbing it as a taken-for-granted framework for development: they prioritised democratisation and (liberal) globalisation, partially conceding their sovereignty in the process (Rodrik 2012). Moreover, the post-socialist transformation under the blueprints of the Washington Consensus and European integration fostered not only externally imposed reforms and limitation of sovereignty, but also and fostered dependence on foreign capital. Only Slovenia's export-driven "neo-corporatism" balanced by a strong labour movement, up to a point, seemed resilient; however, Eurozone financial troubles and post-crisis macroeconomic restructuring showed that "Slovenia [too] has not escaped the regional crisis of dependency" (Živkovič 2015).

However, it has not been until recently that global integration and concessions of (geoeconomic) sovereignty have been questioned in the post-Yugoslav mainstream. The most critical blow to this Western approach to solving the globalisation trilemma has been witnessing the waning capacity of the Western model to generate economic growth, with nested impacts: since GFC, in particular, the global "West" has grown slower than the "East"; Europe has grown slower than the US, and the post-Yugoslav countries, even while having episodes of bursting progress and growing faster than the EU core, have remained far from the desired high-growth rate needed to close the gap with the rest of

the continent. Thus, over time, Europeanisation and Westernisation have become tougher to sell in former Yugoslavia (and elsewhere).

In the 2010s, China tailored its approach according to the "dependent capitalist" (16+1 Cooperation and the Belt & Road in Central and Eastern Europe 2018) condition of the post-Yugoslav countries, framing them, along with the rest of CESEE, as part of the Global South – even if many former Yugoslavs, who see themselves as "temporarily embarrassed"[7] Northerners (or Westerners) who just did not make it yet, may not be necessarily flattered by such categorisation. In practice, however, the post-Yugoslav states, facing an increasing friction between the West and China, have carefully navigated between their strategic allegiances and obligations stemming from the process of pooling of sovereignty and security on one hand, and taking advantage of business opportunities with China on the other. That relations with China had to be balanced with commitments to strategic partners was particularly visible, when during a joint press conference with former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated that any decision Serbia makes regarding economic cooperation with China, before being implemented, is first submitted to the EU for approval (vucic.rs 2018).

This delicate situation is further complicated by the unexpected convergence of geoeconomic strategies between the West and China around more state-led economic development (Vangeli 2021). In response to China's perceived economic ascendancy, the liberal West has been gradually embracing protectionist measures and industrial policies that seemed unthinkable in the early 21st century, while statist China, not relinquishing control over the economy, has been calling for more openness. More moderate than the American full-fledge trade and tech war with China, the EU by the mid-2020s embraced "economic security," largely supplanting the laissez faire ontology that had underpinned the EU project since its founding. Economic security, for the most part, means "de-risking" from China in critical sectors, and from exposure to Chinese "overcapacity" and other asymmetries. However, European states, including the former Yugoslav ones, still try to balance commitments to the EU and hedging their bets by continuing to do business with China, as their own version of "economic security" entails a stable inflow of capital. Moreover, according to EU's parameters, former Yugoslav counters (perhaps with the exception of Slovenia) who are much less globally integrated, are less dependent on China compared to, e.g., Western Europe, in the sense that the former Yugoslavia's economic cooperation with China is a matter of political choice (e.g. the decision to get a Chinese loan), whereas EU's dependencies are structural and market-based (e.g. dependence on critical materials or key components).

Economic Development

Yugoslav high living standards left Chinese visitors in the 1970s and 1980s dumbfounded, changing their perspectives on alternative socialist pathways (see Zhou, 2025). Yugoslav officials, long subjected to Chinese criticism, now

took satisfaction in the fact that "they could afford to reward every student who would go to China with a scholarship equal to the salary of the top Chinese leaders" (Mrevlje 2024). For China, material progress emerged as the utmost priority, captured by Deng's dictum "to get rich is glorious."

During his 1978 Belgrade visit, Hua Guofeng for the first time divulged China's ambitions to embark on a "new long march" (Ostojić 1996) to the outside world, echoing the historic 1934–1935 Long March that once inspired Yugoslav partisans, just as Yugoslavia now inspired Chinese reforms. This "new long march" has since propelled China's unprecedented economic "miracle" that outperformed all expectations. Yet, China's rise has not come without discontents. Facing the negative externalities of growth (corruption, environmental degradation, and different forms of inequalities, to name a few), in the 2010s China supplanted the reform-era "high speed growth" model with a "high-quality development" one, reflecting an evolving "primary contradiction": from fixing underdevelopment through reform 1978–2017, to the post-2017 fixing of the imbalances caused by growing too big and too fast due to reform (X. Han and Du 2024). Conversely, the Yugoslav successor states also defied Western blueprints by underperforming, as they stumbled through never-ending, inconclusive transition processes (Jović 2022), compounded by the deep crises of the Western model itself following GFC.

There are important caveats. Slovenia's advanced economy stands apart when it comes to the transition experience, and when it comes to cooperation with China, fitting more into what Chinese planners call "South-South cooperation with North-South characteristics." In practice, while standing in solidarity and cherishing traditional friendship, China has interest in advanced Slovenian technology, just as it has interest in Western European and American one. Hisense's acquisition of Gorenje in 2018, and Gorenje's role in technology transfer as Hisense expands globally – including on the American continent (Rogelja and Bofulin, 2025) is an exemplary case not only of an economic turnaround, but also integration of Slovenian technology and production in worldwide learning and what can be considered successful practices of transnational management. In a historical sense, the Hisense-Gorenje case echoes the 1980s, when Slovenian enterprises transferred Yugoslav and American technology to China (Svetličič 2021). Yet, in this, there is an interest for Slovenian companies, too, who welcome Chinese capital and knowhow (at times, more enthusiastically than many of their Western counterparts). Deeply embedded in global automotive value chains, by the mid-2020s Slovenia opposed EU tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs), while promoting strategic cooperation with Chinese EV companies (Ministrstvo za gospodarstvo, turizem in šport 2024), hoping for (two-way) technology transfer and integration of Slovenia's car parts suppliers in the emerging global Chinese EV value chains, at a time when European automotive industry faces existential challenges.

In contrast, China's emergence in the "Western Balkans" has been marked by pure "South-South"-style infrastructural, energy, and heavy industrial projects neglected by Western partners (Vangeli 2022b). The relationship between

China and the less developed Yugoslav successor states, in that sense, resembles much more the cooperation China has with the Global South than with advanced economies. It also echoes the socialist past. The focus on "brick-and-mortar" development evokes the Yugoslav ethos of mass construction that symbolised national progress and unity, while addressing long-standing developmental gaps and disparities – some dating back to the Yugoslav era itself (e.g. uneven infrastructure development), and others, to the post-socialist transition (e.g. the collapse of large socialist-era industrial complexes). China's visions of the New Silk Roads resonate with unfinished project and the historical aspirations to transform the "flyover" Balkans into a bridge between the East and the West, overcoming the tyranny of unfavourable geography that has impeded regional development throughout history (Milanović 2018). Yet, connectivity and geography get new meaning in the age of securitisation of globalisation, as Western European companies retreating from China explore "nearshoring" (and "allyshoring") in the "Western Balkans," while China itself also uses the Balkans' proximity to and (prospective inclusion in) the common European market.

China-led brick-and-mortar development also appeals to a sense of vanity among both post-Yugoslav publics and elites, eager to showcase rapid development. This high-risk, high-gain approach echoes China's experience of building infrastructure megaprojects as a backbone to economic growth, appealing to publics seeking visible and tangible progress (and to elites seeking gains). However, such developmental approach also opens a number of questions.

The first high-speed rail project in former Yugoslavia, cutting the travel time between Belgrade and Novi Sad from up to 2 hours to just 36 minutes, built by China Railway International Company (CRIC) and China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), exemplifies how China can indeed help close infrastructure gaps and energise Balkan economies, while providing legitimacy to governments who engage in such strategic projects. However, in Sino-post-Yugoslav relations, limited capacities, institutional deficits, and transgressive practices – including financial, governance, environmental and labour issues, among others have imposed significant reality checks to the phantasmatic discourse of cooperation. The interplay of systemic weaknesses and conflicting priorities, or the "synergy of failures between investors, host states and regional institutions" (Tsimonis et al. 2019), leads to poor environmental, labour and others outcomes, sometimes posing a threat to human security (Bjeloš and Vuksanović 2022). A grim reminder of the immense costs of the lack of due diligence came with the collapse of part of the renovated Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, which tragically resulted in 15 fatalities and numerous injuries, sparking the mass protests throughout the country and the most potent threat to the rule of President Aleksandar Vučić (who has been in office since 2012, and amassed central powers in 2017).

Beyond immediate challenges of governance and compliance when it comes to infrastructure cooperation, Sino-post-Yugoslav cooperation also raises about its broader developmental trajectory and sustainability. Chinese capital

in the Western Balkan countries has flowed into labour-intensive, low value-added, and environmentally taxing projects, including extractive industries such as mining, fossil-fuel energy projects like thermal power plants, and heavy pollution industries like tyre manufacturing and steel production. The lesser developed Yugoslav successor states primarily export raw materials and low value-added products to China (Krstinovska and Vuksanović 2023), reinforcing concerns about sustainability and economic dependency. The case of Zijin in Bor, Serbia (Ren, 2025) is a case in point: while performing exceptionally well and becoming a success story of Serbia's economic renewal, Zijin's negative environmental footprint has galvanised protest movements (Prelec 2021). Moreover, under law, foreign mining companies pay 15% corporate tax in Serbia (lower than the EU and global averages), and, with effective tax structuring, can repatriate their full profits (US DoS 2024). When viewed in the broader context of Serbia's extractivist turn and mine operations proliferating under foreign (including Western) ownership, such as Rio Tinto's controversial lithium mine (Stuehlen and Anderl 2024), Zijin's activities further raises the question about dependencies, but also the trade-offs between quick economic fixes and long-term strategic development.

Ultimately, one can argue that Chinese actionable geoeconomic imaginaries of belts, roads, and technological development are beneficial for the Yugoslav successor states insofar they can be effectively aligned with the development strategies of the Yugoslav successor states themselves. And to develop strategies that fully take advantage of such opportunity requires reclaiming state-led development, which in some way, implies going along with the new global zeitgeist well beyond China. By the 2020s, even Western actors, including the EU, have begun embracing elements of state-led or at least state-coordinated development and new types of industrial policies in order to increase their competitiveness in a world in which China plays an increasingly significant role. Such convergence towards "more state" in the economy is also reflected in the new EU enlargement approach, calling for Yugoslav successor states to leverage their national strengths and pursue "smart specialisation" to address developmental bottlenecks (Jovanović and Vujanović 2023) – an approach that echoes principles of China's New Structural Economy (Lin 2012).

Yet, post-Yugoslav-China interaction also underscores the contrasting structural frameworks at play, particularly the stark disparities in scale, institutional robustness, and strategic coherence. The challenge of asymmetry in size and capacity is particularly significant, evident even within the EU, where member states often struggle to coordinate and cooperate on China, to their own detriment. In the post-Yugoslav context, however, it is particularly ironic that the very countries that worked hard to separate from one another, when facing a global giant like China, realise just how disproportionate their individual capacities are by comparison. Achieving a meaningful "multilateralisation" of the cooperation with China (Jaklič and Svetličič 2019) is thus in their best interest, as their ability to benefit from their relationship with China depends on transcending fragmentation and embracing collective action.

Peace and Stability

Yugoslavia's breakup remains a negative benchmark in the eyes of Chinese policymakers and scholars, underlining risks of ethnic fragmentation. The highly influential and controversial "pop-nationalist" Song Hongbing likens the breakup of Yugoslavia to China's tragic and bloody period when China was divided into "Three Kingdoms" (third century AD) (*qian nansilafu jieti jiemi* (The secret of the desintegration of Yugoslavia) 2017), evoking a core Chinese national myth, used to warn of immense "chaos" (*luan*), conflict and tragedy caused by insufficient central authority (Besio and Tung 2012).

The Yugoslav lessons inform China's post-1990 central ethnic policy tenet that a harmonious, functional multiethnic society requires a tightly managed, top-down nation-building project ("state-led nationalism"), in which "patriotic education" and loyalty to the Party-state are central – an antidote to the Yugoslav (and Soviet) approaches of "bottom-up" empowerment of nationalities, which China sees as dangerous ideas (Zhao 1998). Today, China is a multiethnic state, comprised of ethnic Han majority (exceeding 91% of the population) and 55 ethnic minorities, who, by the letter of the law, are granted economic development opportunities, political representation, and special collective rights (Sun 2019). However, in practice, these policies coexist with strict state control over ethnic issues, suppression of dissent, and a push for "ethnic fusion" around the Han identity, a process largely tolerated by many non-Han Chinese (E. Han 2020, 461). However, China's ethnic policies have been far from uncontested: in particular, territorially concentrated, and religiously devout parts of Tibetan and Uyghur minorities have engaged in long-term political struggle for greater autonomy or independence, which, at times in history has involved violent resistance. In response, they have been subjected to surveillance, coercion (including controversial "reeducation camps") and population redistribution, alongside large-scale economic development initiatives which CPC views as stabilising force (O'Brien 2022). Framed by Beijing as measures to ensure stability and counter separatism, these policies have drawn widespread international condemnation. Yet, for China, the "Yugoslav nightmare," a fragmented, contested, and ultimately failed attempt at managing diversity, worsened by external involvement, still looms as large as ever.

China has also steered away from a Yugoslav-style decentralised and "politically negotiated" economy where unequally developed territorial units and ethnic groups clash over distribution of resources. In an unexpected display of "Ante-stalgia" (Sasso 2020), Zhang (Biele Nansilafu (Goodbye Yugoslavia) 2021) lauds the last Yugoslav reformer, Ante Marković for his de-fragmentationist pan-Yugoslavism aiming to build a strong, unified, centrally coordinated, European-integrated market economy, which, in Zhang's view, would have been the only way to preserve the federation. Moving beyond generic redistribution, today China pursues targeted regional economic development programmes (Yu 2018), which are also synchronised with the BRI.

Externally, the Yugoslav lessons contribute to China's "developmental peace" or "peace through development," an approach to resolving conflicts and tensions through economic development. Developmental peace is nominally indifferent to political and ethnic divisions, while rooted in respect for sovereignty and non-interference (notably, two key underlying themes of the historic Yugo-Chinese normative encounters). Prioritising development over identitarian issues has enabled China to "shelve" disputes in its neighbourhood, and pursue deep economic cooperation (e.g. with Japan) without having reached reconciliation (Guo 2012). "Developmental peace" principles are imbued in China's BRI (D. Li 2021), and more recently, its GSI (Mariani 2024). While not defined in negative terms, and even seen as complementary with Western endeavours (He 2021), in practice "developmental peace" significantly departs from the liberal paradigm of dealing with (post)conflict challenges. The liberal paradigm has guided conflict resolution globally, including in the post-Yugoslav space since the 1990s, resting on often complex institutional re-design and externally mediated reconciliation of conflicting parties, while paradoxically often ending up prioritising stability over democratic principles, with an overall mixed track record at best (Bianchini 2014).

In former Yugoslavia, China's normative principles intersect with a complex security agenda. Notably, China supports Serbia on the Kosovo issue. Such position is not exceptional as several EU and NATO members still refrain from recognising Kosovo's independence. However, China approaches Kosovo from a distinct geopolitical and strategic angle. The principle of elevating "internal administrative arrangements" to status of international border is why Beijing has seen Yugoslavia's dissolution, and in particular Kosovo's secession as the potential precedent for "nightmare" scenarios regarding Taiwan or its autonomous regions (Marsh and Gvosdev 2006). More recently, hawkish voices in China have even suggested that Beijing lends Belgrade a hand in Kosovo derecognition campaigns, mirroring successful Taiwan derecognition efforts (Krstinovska and Demjaha 2022); on the flipside, Kosovo has been building up its relations with Taiwan, demonstrating resistance to the Sino-Serbian partnership, and alignment with hawkish Western actors (Ilazi and Vladisavljev 2023).

China's involvement in the peace process in BiH further reflects challenges on its peacemaking learning curve. While backing the Dayton arrangements in BiH since 1995, in 2020 China, alongside Russia, opposed extending the mandate of the Office of High Representative (OHR), alleging its partiality to the detriment of BiH's sovereignty (Peter and Houghton 2024). Furthermore, in May 2024, China voted against the Srebrenica Genocide commemoration resolution, citing hastiness, lack of consensus and risks to BiH's stability (Fu 2024). Both Chinese OHR and Srebrenica actions have prompted criticism that China favours the positions of Republika Srpska (RS); economic cooperation asymmetries – China's tangible cooperation with the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH) notwithstanding – have reinforced such interpretations (Vangeli 2024). Religion matters, too: the predominantly Muslim FBiH has become critical towards China's policies in Xinjiang, although some

Muslim clerics support China's official discourse, reflecting global divisions in the Ummah on the issue (Kesmer and Zvijerac 2023). Ultimately, perceptions in BiH are more balanced than the eye suggests, with difference in nuances: while RS sees China increasingly as a strategic partner, FBiH sees China solely as a business opportunity (Hirkić 2024).

Local political contestation, in addition to geopolitics, further complicates post-Yugoslav-Chinese relations. Even though China does not formally take sides during political contestation, post-Yugoslav liberal actors often frame the presence of China as supporting right-wing populist incumbents (e.g. Gruevski in Macedonia until 2015; or Vučić in Serbia and Dodik in RS, ongoing at the time of writing), while governance and transparency issues, including corruption scandals implicating Chinese actors, reinforce such perceptions (Vangeli 2022b). There are, however, opposite examples as well, when contentious incumbent figures from the region turn against China: Slovenia's conservative leader Janez Janša, known for his fervent anti-communist and anti-Yugoslav stance, in the period 2020–2022 had adopted a distinctly pro-Taiwan position (GOV.SI 2022). Janša has historically promoted revisionist narratives of Chinese history that cast the Kuomintang (KMT) in a favourable light and the CPC in a negative one, arguing that a similar historical reassessment is needed in the case of Yugoslavia and Slovenia (Janša 2016). Slovenia's post-2022 government has since repaired the relations with China, affirm the One China policy, and echoing the "traditional friendship" (STA 2024).

As China largely avoids involvement in post-Yugoslav contentious politics, in practice, it often aligns with Western-led reconciliation efforts. For example, in 2018, the name change of Macedonia into North Macedonia with the Prespa Agreement (symbolically erasing the last vestiges of Yugoslavia from official use by abolishing the reference *Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*), pro-China voices alluded to China having been aligned with the West and behind the curtains played a role in resolving the Greco-Macedonian name dispute (Lee 2019).[8] Aimed at securing Macedonia's integration into NATO and EU, thus, the Prespa Agreement had unintended consequences: the stabilisation of Greco-Macedonian relations removed the obstacle for Greece to join the China-CEEC Cooperation Initiative, while Alexis Tsipras' historic visit to Skopje in 2019 also included discussions on trilateral cooperation with China (ANA-MPA 2019). This illustrates a broader dynamic of China and local actors taking advantage of Western-led diplomatic interventions to advance their own agenda, prompting Western grievances of Chinese developmental "freeriding" on Western security provisions.

However, as seen from Beijing, contentious politics remains an obstacle, distracting from what China identifies as the core priority in Sino-post-Yugoslav relations: fostering economic development as a remedy for the region's structural fragilities. China has thus tried to recast the post-Yugoslav space not as a "powder keg," a perception that remains entrenched in both the local and Western discourse, but one of shared histories, and possibilities for economic renewal under the New Silk Roads imaginaries. There is no better example

than the case of Sarajevo – which in the regional and Western imagination is associated with wars and permanent divisions, but in the Chinese narrative it is still predominantly associated with the iconic Yugoslav film *Valter defends Sarajevo* (more on its popularity in China see Talmacs 2025; Zhou 2025; and Gledić 2025), and thus regarded with a sense of affinity and admiration. Moreover, while geopolitical friction with the West often requires reactive posturing, China typically strives for a proactive stance, which is reflected in its geoeconomic approach. Sarajevo today is an important hub or China's Digital Silk Road, where China's tech giant Huawei, contested by the US as a security threat, positions itself as supporting a young generation of technological leaders and innovators, not least by investing in R&D and sponsoring *Sarajevo Unlimited*, a landmark international technology summit (Bojinović-Fenko, Vangeli, and Kočan n.d.). Similarly, Novi Pazar in Serbia's Sandžak region, today seen in the West as a "divided city," through a "Sino-Yugo-nostalgic" (Gledić, 2025) lens is celebrated as the site where Chinese textile companies in 1980s learned their trade, enabling them to conquer global markets (Bulić 2017). Unperturbed with narratives of ethnic division, Beijing Urban Construction Group, known for taking part in the construction of Beijing's two major projects, the 2008 Olympics facilities and the futuristic Daxing Airport, sees Novi Pazar as a city with a bright future due to its exceptionally young population, and thus an attractive investment destination (Kalić 2022).

However, on the ground, unresolved fractures in the post-Yugoslav context challenge Chinese Yugo-enthusiasm in most unexpected ways: for instance, at the margins of a 2015 China-CESEE event in Beijing, representatives of different Yugoslav successor states disagreed over the cultural ownership of *Valter*, whose director was Bosnian, the lead actor a Serb, and the main production unit from Montenegro. As chapters in this book show, today, the film stimulates contemporary Chinese red tourism to BiH (Talmacs, 2025), but is also instrumentalised in boosting Sino-Serbian relations (Gledić, 2025). Debates such as the one on "who does *Valter* belong to," even if benign, show that evoking shared histories and offering pragmatic opportunities cannot circumvent the impasse of fragmentation. Beyond *Valter*, China often draws on deeper, ancient histories, trying to utilise them as shared *civilisational* histories, only to face the reality that the same narratives are a source of *ethnonational* division in the post-Yugoslav context and beyond. A case in point is how China uses the figure of Alexander the Great as one of the trailblazers of the ancient Silk Roads, in service to its integrative historical narrative underpinning BRI, in contrast to, e.g., Macedonian, Greek, and other ethnonational narratives in the Balkans which often use Alexander to reinforce division (Uskoković 2022).

The persistence of nationalist divisions is in practice a challenge for China's pragmatic agenda in the Yugoslav successor states, and certainly arouses sadness among the older generations and especially the idealist alumni of the Yugo-Chinese exchanges who are involved in shaping the contemporary relations between the two sides. However, for China, there is a silver lining in this: that the post-Yugoslav fragmentation persists despite – and some might argue,

because of – decades of advancing the liberal agenda, offers China, who once "envious" (Biele Nansilafu (Goodbye Yugoslavia) 2021) of Yugoslavia's prosperity, a reluctant sense of *schadenfreude*, affirming the "correctness" of its own model and worldview in the long run, and legitimises its past and present policy choices of steering away from the Western liberal agenda.

Towards Yugo-Chinese Alterlives?

This book has aimed to move the debate on (post-)Yugo-Chinese relations forward, capturing the dialectical complexity of the historic Sino-Yugoslav relations, so often missed in contemporary policy-oriented debates on economic cooperation and geopolitical balancing that dominate the extant literature. The turn to the historical context of the relationship between Yugoslavia and China offers a rich and compelling account that matters not simply for nostalgia's sake, but rather because it provides novel insights and angles for interpretation of both past and contemporary developments. The Yugo-Chinese normative encounters, animated by a shared quest for a non-hegemonic, alternative socialist modernity, were marked by ideational resonances, i.e. elements of diffusion, lesson-drawing and experimentation, whose consequences are relevant still today, and with Yugoslavia long gone, remain central to understanding Global China, including its role in the post-Yugoslav space (see Table 13.1).

The reverberations of the Yugo-Chinese shared past and its *alterlives*, even when not explicitly articulated, today help China generate symbolic depth and appeal, quasi-analogous to the one Yugoslavia commanded in the eyes of Chinese planners in the late 1970s and early 1980s, whose role was, as shown by Pavlićević and Milić (2025), not one of a role-model to follow, but one particular model of how things can be done differently. While historically China and Yugoslavia operated within a socialist (albeit different) frame of reference, today China and the post-Yugoslav states are far more distant normatively; however, systemic differences notwithstanding, as Gledić (2025) argues, the political cooperation between China and the Yugoslav successor states, and in particular Serbia, is at a much higher level in the 2020s than Yugo-Chinese cooperation has ever been. To some extent, in the eyes of Yugoslav successor states, China in the 21st century emerges not as a model to follow, but rather as a geopolitical and geoeconomic partner, who thanks to its size and unique trajectory, extends the realms of what can be considered possible primarily in terms of economic development (Vangeli 2022a) and to some extent in terms of dealing with post-conflict realities (Vangeli and Zupančič n.d.), in a region still feeling the material consequences of Yugoslav disintegration and the cognitive inertia of post-socialist transition. China, arguably the second most important global actor in the world, is much more formidable variable in the strategic calculus of post-Yugoslav elites today, than Yugoslavia, a successful, reputable, inspirational, but ultimately distant country with limited direct strategic impact, ever was for China. Importantly, however, China's significance, especially its ideational dimension, remains overlooked: while a small, distant

Table 13.1 Ideational resonances from Yugoslavia to China and beyond

Historic triggers	*Impact on China during the Cold War*	*Contemporary resonances in China's trajectory*	*Post-Yugoslav stakes in Global China*
Yugo-Soviet split (1948)	Reinforcing China "leaning on one side" (1950s) Inspiring Sino-Soviet split (1960s)	Centrality of independence and non-alignment	Maintaining national and regional agency while balancing between great powers
Yugoslavia's "own path" of socialism (1958)	Denouncing Yugoslav revisionism (1960s) China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (1978)	Global China upholding "policy rights" to "national model of development"	Reimagination of development trajectories suited to local context
Yugoslavia's "peaceful coexistence" and non-aligned vision (1968)	China's switch from confrontational to cooperative foreign policy (1970s)	BRI as "inclusive globalization"	New opportunities, whose success depends on local capacities
Prosperous Yugoslav socialist market economy (1970s)	China's prioritisation of high-speed growth (1978)	China's shift from high-speed growth to high quality development (2017)	Need to move from extractive to high-value-added cooperation
Yugoslavia's faltering "brotherhood and unity" (1980s)	Reinforcement of centralism (1980s–1990s)	China's ethnic fusion at home and developmental peace abroad	Need to connect external developmental impulses with domestic capacities and consensus

Yugoslavia once sparked widespread research interest and debate in China, the interest for increasingly present and relevant China in former Yugoslavia today is still far more sporadic, mostly transactional, and lacking deeper intellectual curiosity.

However, the historical-ideational lens, particularly the shared search for idiosyncratic alternative socialist models and paradigms during the Cold War, and China's subsequent search for and achievement of resilience amid the downfall of communist parties in USSR and Europe, gains greater relevance when extended beyond the (post)Yugo-Chinese context, and juxtaposed with the contemporary global landscape. As an ideologically imploding West grapples with an ideational void – disillusioned with promises of the "end of history" and "Western path of development" paradigms (Milanović 2019), and increasingly polarised along political and cultural cleavages – there is a

growing need for analytical approaches that can confront the blind spots of liberal democratic teleology, while avoiding a lapsing into right-wing populism, nationalism, and conspiracy theories. Admittedly, the latter has been triumphant in the US, as, at the time of writing this book, the Trump-led coalition of paleo-conservatives and techno-libertarians threatens to unravel the Western consensus on basic facets of social and political development. Such tendencies have been gaining momentum in Europe, too. While the rise of Western right-wing nationalist populism symbolises the breakdown of liberal normative hegemony, it should be seen as an internal mutation feeding off disillusionment, which does not (yet) propose an alternative system but rather exploits the failures of the incumbent one. There is, in this process, a "cosmic irony:" in how, by the 2020s, the US, and the West more broadly, no longer tires to export liberal democracy to China, as it struggles to contain its own systemic and ideological unravelling (Che 2024).

Against the backdrop of a global ideational flux, a relatively successful China emerges as a cognitive challenge, a "Red Swan" (Heilmann 2018), demonstrating an alternative path of development that contradicts the "end of history" approach, challenging proponents of mainstream "elitist, Western-centric nature of the conventional wisdom [who] cannot imagine solutions emerging from non-elites and places outside Europe and North America" (Ang 2024). China's development trajectory then raises pertinent questions about socio-political and economic development, prompting soul-seeking in the West (Milanović, 2019), and on the way also inspiring a process of diffusion (and potential convergence) via competition as the West increasingly takes pages from China's own playbook to compete with China (Vangeli 2021). These processes, then, are poised to tie into the post-Yugoslav context as well.

For one, the era of the post-Yugoslav ideological "autopilot" calibrated against the Western, and in particular Eurocentric standards, is over. Development agendas in the post-Yugoslav space and beyond – whether within the New Silk Roads framework or in competition with it – inevitably face uncomfortable questions of sacrifices and trade-offs, in terms of sustainability, governance, and social justice among others. Meanwhile, decades-long fragmentation and tensions raise the question of whether "shelving" disputes in favour of regional "developmental peace" in the post-Yugoslav space may be a worthwhile supplement, or even alternative to liberal strategies, who, at best, have underdelivered, and with the retreat of the US, are about to also lose key external support.

Contemporary geopolitical reversals, realignments, and outright U-turns in geopolitical allegiances that accompany the political mutations in the West seems to echo Cold War era-style "strategic triangles," "splits," and "rapprochements," and a deficit of predictability. As a result, as I conclude this chapter and this volume, the fate of the former Yugoslav space – just as the fate of Europe, and the world – is uncertain as it has ever been: for illustration, while Western debates remain preoccupied with the possibility of China's demise (and while Chinese leaders up to this date fear a Yugoslav scenario), there is also a possibility that BRI outlasts NATO. Already abhorred by the breakdown of the liberal order, liberal readers may find the possibility of defiant communist-ruled

China gaining further relevance in the post-Yugoslav (and, in general, global) futures unsettling. It is also possible that those yearning to move beyond (the remnants of) the liberal, Western-centric teleology, even if not too sympathetic to China itself, may see China's ascent with a murmur of approval, especially when juxtaposed against the vision of a volatile "America First" world which is shaping to be the main alternative to the "end of history" vision. And realist voices may be advocating for strategic hedging in response to these developments. Finally, China's own contradictions and challenges undercut the aura of inevitability in its rise. In dealing with such uncertainty, the study of the past and its legacies and afterlives, as presented in our volume, comes handy: the past provides a space, or rather a reservoir of experience and knowledge that can inform our horizon of expectations about the future (Koselleck 2004).

In conclusion, our effort to revisit the interesting, understudied, but also, resonant Yugo-Chinese histories, legacies, and afterlives, ends with a provocation for what could be *alterlives* of the old Yugo-Chinese relations, defying temptations to think in New Cold War terms, but nevertheless still fully engaging with prospects of uncertainty. In some sense, the uncertain context helps us avoid utopian thinking: *alterlives* are not about seeking a pristine, self-righteous geopolitical or developmental strategy, but more about realising possibilities within the contradictions of inherently imperfect reality, and the challenge of making the most "using what you have" (Ang 2024; Auger 2021). Regardless of whether one interprets the impact of Global China in more positive or negative terms, China's presence – which appearss, albeit not without contradictions, to be shaping to be a long-term one – de-centres the reading of (former) Yugoslavia, inherently motivating Yugoslav successor state to re-think their agency in a global context, and especially against the backdrop of radical uncertainty. The conundrums of the present and the horizon of possible futures remain deeply entangled with the legacies and afterlives of the past: just as China's footprint reshapes former Yugoslavia today, traces of Yugoslavia's transformative socialist project linger in Global China's trajectory, reactivating knowledge, memories, and sentiments often suppressed in the post-Yugoslav space itself, as an open-ended history continues to unfold in real time – as unpredictable as it is unfinished.

Notes

1 "The idea of alterlife is that you don't wait for the decolonial horizon to appear. You start working now, with what you have, to try and build the world you want – while also respecting that it is sick, and contaminated" (Auger 2021). Also see Murphy (2017).
2 My definition of normative encounters draws partially on Althusser's (2006) "philosophy of the encounter" and more substantially on studies of ideational diffusion (Vangeli 2019, 2021).
3 The perennial search for a feasible socialist model within the plurality of models was an important feature of socialist international politics during the Cold War (Bianchini 2015).
4 Interview with an alumnus of the Yugo-Chinese exchanges in the 1980s, a retired senior diplomat and scholar, Beijing, November 2014.
5 Interview with a former FRY diplomat, Belgrade, March 2018.

6 Interviews with Chinese researchers on Yugoslavia, Beijing, October 2014.
7 This expression is play on John Steinbeck's (disputed) saying that socialism never took root in the US because Americans do not see themselves as proletariat, but rather as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.
8 While China never got involved in the Greco-Macedonian dispute, it has historically sympathised with Macedonia's struggle for recognition and distinction. During Hua's Skopje visit in 1978, he spoke on the Macedonian question, framing it as a mirror of the Southeast Asian crisis evoking Ancient Macedonian history, expressing China's support for Yugoslavia's and the Socialist Republic of Macedonia's stance against regional pressures, primarily coming from Soviet-backed Bulgaria (Sfetas 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, as Greece disputed Macedonia's name and history, China, alongside Russia, were the only UNSC member states that had recognised the independent Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name, which was the main obstacle for Greece joining 16+1 before Prespa.

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