

# IMESS DISSERTATION

**Note: Please email the completed mark sheet to Year 2 coordinator (cc Chiara Amini [chiara.amini@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:chiara.amini@ucl.ac.uk) and fiona.rushworth@ucl.ac.uk)**

Please note that IMESS students are not required to use a particular set of methods (e.g. qualitative, quantitative, or comparative) in their dissertation.

<b>Student:</b>	Dongyu Zhai
<b>Dissertation title:</b>	Desecuritisation and Strategic Narratives: China's 16/17+1 Initiative in the Central and Eastern European Countries

	70+	69-65	60-61	59-55	54-50	<50
	A	B	C	D	E	F
<b>Knowledge</b> <i>Knowledge of problems involved, e.g. historical and social context, specialist literature on the topic. Evidence of capacity to gather information through a wide and appropriate range of reading, and to digest and process knowledge.</i>	x					
<b>Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b> <i>Demonstrates a clear grasp of concepts. Application of appropriate methodology and understanding; willingness to apply an independent approach or interpretation recognition of alternative interpretations; Use of precise terminology and avoidance of ambiguity; avoidance of excessive generalisations or gross oversimplifications.</i>	x					
<b>Structure &amp; Argument</b> <i>Demonstrates ability to structure work with clarity, relevance and coherence. Ability to argue a case; clear evidence of analysis and logical thought; recognition of an argument's limitation or alternative views; Ability to use other evidence to support arguments and structure appropriately.</i>	x					
<b>Presentation &amp; Documentation</b> <i>Accurate and consistently presented footnotes and bibliographic references; accuracy of grammar and spelling; correct and clear presentation of charts/graphs/tables or other data. Appropriate and correct referencing throughout. Correct and contextually correct handling of quotations.</i>	x					
<b>Methodology</b> <i>Understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.</i>	x					

<b>ECTS Mark:</b>	A	<b>Charles Mark:</b>	A	<b>Marker:</b>	Jan Hornat
<i>Deducted for late submission:</i>				<b>Signed:</b>	
<i>Deducted for inadequate referencing:</i>				<b>Date:</b>	27-Aug-2020

## MARKING GUIDELINES

**A (UCL mark 70+) = A (Charles mark- excellent):** Note: marks of over 80 are given rarely and only for truly exceptional pieces of work.

Distinctively sophisticated and focused analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Comprehensive understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.

**B (UCL mark 69-65) = B (Charles mark – very good)**

**C (UCL mark 64-60) = C (Charles mark – good):** A high level of analysis, critical use of sources and insightful interpretation. Good understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research,

showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research. 65 or over equates to a B grade.

**D (UCL mark 59-55) = D (Charles mark – satisfactory)**

**E (UCL mark 54-50) = E (Charles mark – sufficient):**

Demonstration of a critical use of sources and ability to engage in systematic inquiry. An ability to engage in sustained research work, demonstrating methodological awareness. 55 or over equates to a D grade.

**F (UCL mark less than 50) = F (Charles mark - insufficient):**

Demonstrates failure to use sources and an inadequate ability to engage in systematic inquiry. Inadequate evidence of ability to engage in sustained research work and poor understanding of appropriate research techniques.

## **Please provide substantive and detailed feedback!**

### **Comments, explaining strengths and weaknesses (*at least 300 words*):**

Dongyu Zhai has chosen a topic for her dissertation that is topical and particularly resonant in Central and Eastern Europe. The question of how widely and how deeply Chinese influence penetrates into the political and economic life of the Central European states is often probed by think-tank analysts and journalist. However, these often adopt superficial methodologies of measuring “Chinese influence” that merely seek sensational and hurried conclusions based on revelations of which Central European politicians met with which Chinese officials and lobbyists. Ms. Zhai has applied a much more sober and nuanced perspective by carefully reading into the discourse that China employs to target the (often true, but often constructed) narratives that place Beijing in a negative light and downplay its image in the CEE region. In a very constructivist/post-structural approach, Ms. Zhai demonstrates that world orders may undergo significant changes through the application of discourse and not necessarily just brute force.

In order to fully unearth the manifestations of power and the operationalization of the Chinese government’s discursive tactics, Ms. Zhai adopts the methodology of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which represents a relevant approach to her research. Within the discourse she tracks the “strategic narratives” that further serve to bolster Chinese soft power in the CEE region, and she interprets these narratives through the prism of the securitization/desecuritization theory. I consider the theoretical-methodological framework to be the biggest strength of the paper, particularly the parts where Ms. Zhai contrasts Western IR theories with their Chinese counterparts and introduces Chinese academics’ views of securitization/desecuritization.

The weaker part of the dissertation is the chapter focused on the “reception” of the Chinese narratives. Even though the author acknowledges that it is difficult to clearly track a causality between China’s narratives deployed through the 16/17 + 1 and OBOR initiatives, the reader is not convinced that the described actions of the V4 states (Chapter 5) have been caused/induced by Chinese activities/discourse. The causal link is weak and too subtle to decipher. Chapter 5 also disproportionately focuses on the Czech Republic, leaving less space for Hungary. Nonetheless, Ms. Zhai does not fall into generalizations and maintains a level of nuance when assessing the pro-Chinese stances in Visegrad states, correctly stating that they “mainly centre around individual politicians” (p. 68).

Clarity of language, a logical structure, a sound theoretical framework and especially thorough research render this dissertation a high-quality feat that could be accompanied by follow-up research by Ms. Zhai in a Ph.D. program.

Specific questions you would like addressing at the oral defence (at least 2 questions):

1. Do you think the United States sees China's strategic narratives (which you described in your dissertation) as a threat for its own influence in the CEE states? What is the US reaction?
2. What components of the current so-called "liberal world order" are incompatible with the world order that China seeks to establish?
3. When China formulates its "strategic narratives", do some aspects get "lost in translation"? I.e. do/can Eastern Europeans understand what China actually means by terms such as "community with a shared future for mankind", which are grounded mostly in Chinese traditional political philosophy?