

IMESS DISSERTATION



Note: Please email the completed mark sheet to Year 2 coordinator (cc Chiara Amini 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.

Student:	Dongyu Zhai
Dissertation title:	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
Knowledge <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				
Analysis & Interpretation <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			
Structure & Argument <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					
Presentation & Documentation <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					
Methodology <i>Understanding of techniques applicable to the chosen field of research, showing an ability to engage in sustained independent research.</i>		X				

ECTS Mark:	B	Charles Mark:	B	Marker:	Dr Tomáš Weiss
<i>Deducted for late submission:</i>				Signed:	
<i>Deducted for inadequate referencing:</i>				Date:	27/08/2020

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*):

This is a very ambitious and interesting thesis that tackles a very topical issue of Chinese relations with the CEE region. I would like to commend the way in which the author approached the topic through an innovative and relevant theoretical framework that allowed her to analyse her empirical material from a fresh perspective. With this in mind, I would like to offer a couple of critical comments that limit the persuasiveness of the argument.

Firstly, to the use of securitisation theory and its operationalisation. The choice of the theory and its combination with the strategic narratives framework is persuasive and logical. Also, the link between the strategic narratives and soft power is clear. It is less clear, however, how exactly the link should be made. To what extent does the concept of strategic narratives help operationalise soft power and analyse it in practice? Similarly, there is a very good argument on the compatibility between the two theoretical frameworks. At the same time, the issue of actorship/level of analysis is slightly obfuscated - while soft power focuses primarily on state actors within the international arena, de/securitisation looks into a single polity. As such, the recipients of the respective speech acts differ. This is an issue that permeates the whole thesis. The desecuritising activity of the Chinese officials is mainly targeted at CEE politicians, or even broader international community, including decision makers in Western Europe and the US. Securitisation of China in CEE is, by contrast, an issue of domestic debates. While Chinese activity may contribute to the decision of some CEE politicians not to securitise China deliberately, it does not enter the actual debate over threats and responses that is conducted within the polities (albeit within a broader international context). In addition, while the securitisation framework makes sense in the context of the research question, too little difference is made between securitisation and politicisation in the thesis. The fact that relations with China are subject to a political contestation in the region (and beyond) is without doubts. But successful securitisation means taking the topic out of a regular political debate and an introduction of extreme measures. This may be the case when the CEE states decide to ban Huawei's participation in the 5G market, but the thesis fails to show any other cases of extreme measures, actual or potential.

Lastly in this section, the author uses the securitisation theory (and soft power concept for that matter) that has opened new forms of security for analysis. Yet, the thesis remains very much in the realist paradigm of great power competition. This approach omits other forms of Chinese challenges to the West - to economic well-being by unfair competition, to political stability by offering an alternative political model. These may be more important issues in the European case.

Secondly, the choice of cases and the method. The V4 countries are, indeed, interesting cases to study. They are, however, not typical examples of CEE countries in the context of the 16/17+1 format. Above all, it can hardly be argued that there is any sort of power contest between China and the EU (p. 2) there. These countries are the EU and they co-decide what the EU policy is. The situation might be different in the case of Albania or Serbia, but this argument cannot be made about the V4. Moreover, the thesis studies the four countries but fails to capitalise on the comparative design. In fact, the thesis approaches the four countries as a single case, even though it presents (particularly in chapter 5) them separately. In this respect, a more thorough analysis of a single extreme case or a more articulated comparison of two or more cases would have offered better understanding of the securitisation and desecuritisisation dynamics in the region.

In addition, the thesis is rather vague in terms of sources and operationalisation. There is nothing about how the sources are analysed. Did the author look for any keywords? Which parts of the documents and speeches qualified for analysis and which did not? Later on, the reader realises that the four strategies of desecuritisisation structure the chapter on Chinese activity, but there is little explanation in the methodology section and there is even less about how the perception can be analysed. Directly following from the comments in the previous paragraphs, the limitation to the official documents and speeches misses the actual locus of the de/securitisation debate in the CEE countries and as such, cannot explain the Chinese influence on the debate properly.

Thirdly, I would like to take an issue with some of the interpretations offered in the thesis, fully acknowledging that all interpretation is subjective. Some statements in the thesis seem to be grossly exaggerated. A case in point is the mention of an "institutional border" between V4 and the rest of Europe due to the creation of the 16/17+1 platform (p. 50). While there may be cases of an institutional border in some institutional competition, such as the East European countries' association with the EU and the membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, this is clearly not the case of

the EU vs. 16/17+1. While the former is a legally binding framework that penetrates deep into the systems of governance of individual countries, the latter is a platform for cooperation.

Similarly, the author's conclusion that the relations between China and the CEE countries are "embodiment of great power struggle" is clearly an oversimplification. The great power struggle is surely one of the factors that plays a role. But too much variance stems from domestic politics as domestic politics plays a significant role in shaping foreign policy of these countries. I would even argue that the issue of China is used by the region's politicians to score points with domestic audiences and/or as a bargaining chip at the EU level. And there is very little impact of what China does or how it talks in that respect (even though some actions and statements may make it more difficult for the local politicians to cooperate with China and less profitable in terms of domestic political contest). In this respect, the Czech relations to Taiwan may be instructive. The thesis perceives them (and the recent dispute over Mr Kubera or Mr Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan) within the framework of great power struggle. But it fails to mention that Taiwanese investments in Czechia were 14 times higher than Chinese in 2019. As a result, there are strong economic arguments for the visit, strong domestic political arguments (endorsement of the Senate's independence, criticism of President Zeman), and, I would argue, a mere context of the great power struggle.

Finally, there are some minor inaccuracies and should be mentioned but do not have an impact on the thesis as a whole:

- The section on Chinese scholars' take on securitisation is interesting (p. 12f). It is, however, slightly different from the previous parts and it is questionable to what extent it fits into the theoretical framework. While the previous parts deal with descriptive literature that tries to interpret reality, this part deals with prescriptive use of de/securitisation by Chinese scholars. In fact, it could be included in the empirical parts of the thesis, either as the Chinese way of understanding the world, or China's self-image.
- The "Bush administration" could be specified (p. 23). Even if the next sentence clarifies that George W. Bush is meant.
- The One China policy has always been the official policy of the CEE countries. It cannot be argued that the countries adopted it only after China had launched the BRI initiative and the 16/17+1 framework.
- Some statements in the Czech reception chapter are misleading (I can comment there as I know the case the best.) It was already PM Nečas's government that started a pragmatic turn towards economics as the main issue in relations with China (p. 56). Similarly, the Dalai Lama's visit to Czechia in 2016 cannot be understood as a unique gesture in response to Xi's visit earlier that year (p. 56). Dalai Lama had been to Czechia regularly many times before and even though his visit may have been interpreted differently that time, it was just another visit among many. As a case in point to my first question on misinterpretations (see below), the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra has no ties with the city of Prague, except for the geographical name (p. 49).

To conclude, this is a good thesis that tackles a very interesting issue from an innovative theoretical perspective. There are several issues with the execution of the research as described above but overall, this is an interesting read that reflects both the level of the student and the effort put into the research. What should be commended is the fact that the author has been aware of some of the deficiencies and discussed them in the text.

Specific questions you would like to be addressed at the oral defence (*at least 2 questions*):

1. The thesis tackles the issue of narratives in an interesting context. One of the issues that may arise is the question of misunderstandings and different interpretations of concepts and references. To what extent is this a problem in the Chinese efforts to de-securitise its image in Central and Eastern Europe?
2. Could you develop the comparative aspect of the research a bit more? What do the similarities and differences between the V4 countries tell about Chinese soft power and de/securitisation of China in Central Europe?