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GLOBAL CHINA, (FORMER) YUGOSLAVIA, AND SOCIALISM

ABSTRACT

This article grounds the study of socialism in the People's Republic of China (PRC), in a critical analysis of power, capitalism, and hegemony. The governance of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is riddled with paradoxes in shaping a distinct socialist model that observers from the West frequently find challenging to digest. It is characterized by both inclusive institutional innovation and authoritarian coercion; leveraging the power of the state in achieving more just economic outcomes while reproducing unfair capitalist social realities; and devising alternatives to the hegemonic neoliberal globalization, while working on safeguarding the status quo and the institutions upon which such hegemony rests. This complex Chinese model is a product of experimentation and learning; some of the lessons that have shaped it originate in the interaction with and reflection on socialist Yugoslavia, whose example has been pivotal in how China has navigated geopolitical complexities and implemented reforms. Finally, the article discusses the contemporary interactions between Yugoslav successor states and China, examining the nature of the impact of Global China and examine any implications for the reflection on socialism in former Yugoslavia.

KEYWORDS

China, Yugoslavia, socialism, globalization, interactions

Introduction

Progressive audiences often ask, “to what extent is China socialist?”, as the guest editors of this issue did to the author of these lines. Such provocative questions require analytical thinking and critical reflexivity because what matters is not only what we (think we) know about China’s trajectory but also our own perspective and relationship with it. The question of whether China is socialist is deeply political and subjective, intersecting with normative debates on political values and global geopolitical and geoeconomic uncertainties. It requires examining our preconceptions of the world and what it should look like. In addressing this challenge, I embrace my positionality as a Global China scholar, whose perspective has been shaped by diverse sources, including

social justice activism, think tank work, and business school curricula, originating from and operating in former Yugoslavia, having worked on (post-)Yugoslav-China relations, and having tried to understand China from the perspective of its global integration. Knowledge produced at these intersections can contribute to discussions on several ancillary topics that are rarely discussed together: China's socialist trajectory, socialist Yugoslavia's legacy and the trajectory of former Yugoslav countries, and theoretical and practical debates on socialism, past, present, and future.

The last question – the one of defining socialism – is perhaps the most challenging one and it is therefore useful to get it out the way early on. The goal here is not to open the Pandora box of what is, in fact, socialism, in both ideological, as well as policy and practical terms, and explicitly not to provide definitions and benchmarks against which we would then measure others (including China). Yet, some orienting points for the discussion that follows are due. My own understanding is closest to the one of the “business school socialist” Paul Adler (2023) that democratic socialism is the most feasible utopian vision that can help us overcome capitalism's profit-seeking myopia that harms humanity and the Earth. Thus, idealistic socialism reconciles the contradiction of democratic (or participatory) decision-making in all aspects of society and the economy and strategic management of institutions and enterprises toward “well-being for people and sustainability for the planet” (Adler 2023). “Liberation of the working people from exploitation” and “mastery over production by the producers” are central to socialism (Chomsky 1986). Socialism is “a situation where the workers gain the upper hand in the class struggle and put in place institutions, policies and social networks that advantage the workers” – “the immense majority of humanity”. Successful socialist policies would turn the social surplus toward ending hunger and illiteracy and addressing fundamental global social and economic problems (Prashad 2019).

Moving on from the question of socialism, in the remainder of the paper, we are left with the daunting and ultimately, ungrateful task, of interpreting and evaluating the complex socio-economic and political reality of China, and then deciding to what extent does it conform to our definitions of socialism, while taking into account the historical relevance of Yugoslavia.

Such discussion requires contextualization, both in terms of comparing China to historical socialist models and assessing its development and impact in the current *Zeitgeist* of extreme uncertainty, or “polycrisis”. An article, book, or lifetime of work cannot adequately address these questions. Therefore, I must use different heuristics, simplify complexities, and speculate, while remaining satisfied with only partially addressing some of the key contradictions that underpin these questions and formulating ambiguous answers that may not satisfy the most demanding readers.

When considering whether and how socialist contemporary China is, I refer to ongoing debates (Bolesta 2014; Losurdo 2017; Whyte 2012; Zhao 2008; Dirlik 2017; M. Li 2009; Mihályi, Szelényi 2020; Mulvad 2019; M. Liu, Tsai 2021; So, Chu 2015) that offer different interpretations. The great Immanuel

Wallerstein (2010) once noted that there is no (prospect for) consensus on China – including what kind of system does it have (socialist or capitalist?) and what kind of global role does it play (imperialist or anti-imperialist?) both within the Left and the Right. Recent geopolitical shifts – commonly termed a New Cold War – add polarization and urgency to such questions. Positions on China and socialism vary in the extremes – some laud it as the most advanced socialist country in the history of humanity, others deride it as a dystopian authoritarian capitalist country antithetical to the ideal of socialism (Žižek 2007). While entertaining these points, the paper tends to raise questions, rather than to render verdicts.

The Yugoslav angle in the second part of this inquiry comes handy. First off, a focus on Sino-Yugoslav historical crossroads helps additionally contextualize China in a different manner than predominant “rise of China” or “China threat” metanarratives. Historically, Yugoslavia and China had intertwined trajectories and cross-referenced each other in ideological debates – in both negative and positive light (Stopić et al. 2023). However, this historical relationship has been defined by a significant asymmetry – during the Cold War – and up until today, Yugoslavia and its experience have played a far more significant role in defining China’s trajectory than vice versa (Vangeli, Pavličević forthcoming). On the other hand, as China – which has learned from the positive examples provided by Yugoslavia, while by all means avoiding repeating its mistakes – has emerged as a global actor in the 21st century, it has an ever growing significance for the former Yugoslav countries – not only because of the growing linkages between the two sides in which the asymmetry is obvious – but also because it reshapes the global and regional context and debate in which the post-Yugoslav region exists (Vangeli 2020). The vantage point of the post-Yugoslav semi-periphery is unique, as one can still take critical distance from the big power struggle between China and the US and offer a more impartial view.

The paper then proceeds as follows. It first discusses China and its (claims to) socialism, by looking at three key questions: power, capital and global impact. It then turns to Yugo-Chinese relations and Sino-Yugoslav intertwined search for (better) socialism, which included navigating stormy Cold War geopolitics, pursuing bold and unconventional reforms, and, for China, witnessing and learning from the trauma of Yugoslavia’s dissolution. In the final section, the paper turns to the impact of Global China in the post-Yugoslav space, where geoeconomic considerations overcast socialist ideals, but nevertheless, still make China somewhat of a distinctive actor in a region where the legacy of socialism is still present even if only playing a marginal role.

The Questions of Socialism (with Chinese Characteristics)

China is one of the few countries in the world where the rule of a communist party has survived the tumultuous events of 1989-1991 (together with Vietnam, North Korea, Laos and Cuba). The CPC has monopolized power in China since 1949 (even though it officially leads a United Front coalition with several junior

partner parties), making it the longest-ruling communist nation in history, surpassing the CPSU (1922-1991). China is more economically powerful than any other country that has claimed to pursue socialism – including the Soviet Union. China’s global impact, both due to its centrality in the global economy and its growing global proactivity, is unlike any (nominally) socialist country before it. China, unlike the Soviet Union, has not openly challenged the hegemonic West in a global Cold War, pursuing pragmatic global networking and conciliatory interdependence as strategic tools instead of ideologically-driven and military-charged confrontation.

The Chinese economy’s sustained growth, the CPC’s persistence and “authoritarian resilience” (Nathan 2003; Fewsmith, Nathan 2018), and “CPC Inc.”’s global rise (Blanchette 2020) are interconnected. China’s economic rise would not have been possible without the CPC’s “directed improvisation” (Ang 2022) that empowered the bottom-up reform process in which the tenacity and perseverance of Chinese labor played a key role; the economic growth has legitimized the CPC while expanding its power through integration in the global political economy.

Here, we must acknowledge how disruptive such developments have been for mainstream Western social and political thought, which has continuously expected China to follow in the footsteps of former socialist countries and collapse or dissolve (Jin 2023). And yet, despite China’s sustained success disproving teleological prophecies, Western thought has not revised its theories. Rather, it has rendered China an abnormal, anomalous case that defies Western common sense, serving as a “metaphor for difference” defined not by what it is but by what it is not (Breslin 2011). Sebastian Heilmann (2018) calls China a “Red Swan” that “represents a significant deviant and unpredicted case with a huge potential impact not only for the global distribution of political and economic powers but also for global debates on models of development”.

As we are yet to see a mainstream Western social and political theory, or reference system that in some way, would consider China’s system as “normal” or to fit within existing taxonomies, China challenges such taxonomical thinking, and the teleological and universalistic zeal of Western liberal democracy [i.e. encapsulated in the “end of history” approach and its echoes in the present (Godehart 2016)]. It is within this context of defiance that the question of China and socialism is particularly relevant: could a China that is “deviant” from liberal perspective be recast as a modern socialist country? Or is it also a “deviant” from a socialist perspective? We thus turn to discussing three elements that can help us make better sense of where China as a proclaimed socialist country stands today: political power and the state, its economic order, and its global context.

The Question of (State) Power

The question of who holds power and to what end uses this power is at the core of debating socialism in practice (Poulantzas, Hall 2014; Quirico, Ragona 2021; Milliband 2009). Boer (2023) proposes a new approach that distinguishes between revolutionary socialism, which is often thought of in the West as an

engaged intellectual and activist endeavor associated with knowledge production, protest movements, or political parties usually not in power, and socialism in power, which is concrete, institutionalized socialism as a programmatic policy agenda embraced by a national government decisively led by a socialist political party (Losurdo 2017). According to this view, China today is only the latter type of “concrete” socialism in power and practice, which is different from revolutionary socialist reflections in societies where socialism is on the margins and cannot overthrow the system or mobilize voters (and when it does, it is crushed, like SYRIZA in Greece).

Put like this, China’s case for socialism is too different from mainstream socialist debates in the West; it should be studied as part of the long lineage of 20th-century socialist states, a few of which survived 1989. Boer calls China the most successful because it has developed “the most advanced” socialist system of governance that has dramatically improved the social well-being of the vast majority of its population and a “whole process people’s democracy” based on the 20th century’s long-term anti-colonial and revolutionary struggle and the People’s Republic’s trajectory. Instead of “democratic socialism”, Boer calls China a “socialist democracy”.

However, Boer’s enthusiastic view is based mostly on official documents without ever critically examining the harsh realities of CPC’s power to stabilize its power, enforce its agenda, and neutralize its opponents. To claim that China is an advanced socialist democracy, one must normalize (or ignore) the fact that China often uses violence, surveillance, censorship, or re-education to advance its socialist agenda, sometimes in a systematic manner, as in Xinjiang, where the CPC claims to fight religious extremism and ethnic separatism (Tobin 2020). Normalizing China’s authoritarian system requires elevating collective social well-being (as defined by the CPC and accepting that the CPC is its representative) as a top political priority over individual or minority rights, i.e., that it is moral to sacrifice the few for the many. This normalization often follows a whataboutist logic of highlighting state power transgressions in nominally liberal Western societies, such as violent protest crackdowns, mass incarceration, proven mass surveillance, and other systemic and structural ills that are part and parcel of the Western landscape, to relativize concerns about authoritarianism in China (Franceschini, Loubere 2020). Statistics showing mass support and legitimacy for the CPC can be used to refute criticism, but only if they are taken at face value without critically examining their reliability. And there is certainly truth in the claims that criticism of authoritarianism in China is often motivated by geopolitical considerations of external actors. Yet, any debate on socialism in China cannot simply ignore the well-documented role of coercion in securing Party rule and social stability.

However, while acknowledging that China is an authoritarian state that sometimes displays its power in brutal ways, we must also agree with Boer that its governance innovations that empower masses are often overlooked in Western debates, whether liberal or socialist. These efforts move the debate beyond the accounts on “performance” or “eudemonic legitimacy”, i.e. the

understanding of a Chinese social contract that foresees trade-off between dramatic improvements in citizens' socio-economic well-being and the CPC's strong monopoly of power, towards a more holistic account of popular legitimacy (Gilley, Holbig 2009; Holbig, Gilley 2010). Considering inclusivity-oriented innovations also helps overcome culture-based reductionism that the Chinese people's collective psyche is conditioned by ancient Chinese traditions, such as Confucianism, that makes authoritarianism more culturally acceptable – in reality, it is not tradition, but rather the agility and inventiveness of the state that offsets the effects of authoritarianism.

The CPC has in fact invested heavily in making the system more predictable, professional, and above all, efficient (Gilley 2008; Zeng 2014; Wang, Vangeli 2016). It has also opened institutions for public participation, e.g. through consultation, public hearings or local-level elections, while developing a responsive political culture that often acknowledges and in some cases deals constructively with protest and petitioning (Wang et al. 2013; Wang, Liu, Pavličević 2018; Ergenc 2014; 2023; Pavličević 2019). CPC has embraced experimental approaches on the local level, to generate best practices to be diffused on the national level – testifying for an improved system of governance (Lejano et al. 2018; Heilmann 2008). It has worked on transforming its cadres into an agile grassroots force that can fulfill public service based on need – e.g. from organizing matchmaking for singles, to helping out with personal and professional issues (Thornton 2017; 2013). Finally, the Party has learned how to back off when public discontent morphs into political risk, notwithstanding it has started to demonstrate less tolerance for dissent after 2013 (Jay Chen 2020). In sum, all these factors have served to legitimize the rule of the CPC, although they still co-exist with, rather than supplant authoritarianism (e.g. surveillance, censorship and coercion).

The Question of Capitalism

Contemporary Chinese society exhibits many capitalist traits; this has led to endless debates and opposing views, with some calling China “capitalism without democracy” (Tsai 2011). Others see China as a socialist economy that will end global capitalism (M. Li 2009). This contradiction can be gut-wrenching and unsettling, requiring an immediate verdict, but a longer explanation is needed first. Especially since “Sinified Marxism” rests upon contradictions (Boer 2017). A ‘good (Chinese) socialist’ must approach them in a systematic and ideologically sound manner, discerning between their different weights and prioritize them accordingly. Different political eras have a central contradiction that requires the most attention and energy to resolve first. Under Mao, CPC faced simple principal contradictions, such as “CPC vs KMT,” “United Front (of CPC and KMT) against the Japanese occupation”, “the people versus imperialism, feudalism and the remnants of KMT forces” and ultimately “proletariat versus bourgeoisie” (Yamei 2017).

In 1978, the CPC famously declared that the key contradiction that the CPC must address was between the ever-growing needs of the people and

the backward production system in China that has been unfit to satisfy those needs (Chang 1996). In other words, CPC recognized the twin predicament of having a hungry population and not having the means to feed them, which is essentially a socialist turn.

This principal contradiction was solved in a disruptive way: China was about to embark on the path of Reform and Opening Up, incrementally and experimentally building a socialist market economy that would be integrated into global capitalism without dismantling the political system that gave the CPC monopoly of power, to generate economic growth and improve the material well-being of the people. Deng's pragmatic justifications (e.g., "black cat or white cat, doesn't matter, as long as the cat catches mice") often unnerved orthodox socialist voices in China and beyond, making it easy to dismiss Dengist ideology as a veil for China capitulating to global capitalism (Kerswell, Lin 2017). This was perhaps the most daring ideological spin: China actively engaged with global capitalism to use it to achieve its socialist, or at least real-politik, goals: to attract technology, knowledge, and capital to fuel its development, rebranding itself as forward-looking and business-friendly, tapping into Western aspirations for the Chinese market, and effectively ascending within the global capitalist framework to turn Western rivals into stakeholders in China's success (So, Chu 2015; Gabusi 2017).

Since 1978, successive Chinese leaderships have fine-tuned the economy, playing up and down state and market forces in different sectors and often in different geographies (e.g., by the 2010s, China had a paradigmatic debate between the state-led and socialist Chongqing model and the more liberal and market-oriented Guangdong model). However, China's economy has been based on "great international circulation" – export-led, investment-fueled growth. In response to the GFC, China issued a massive stimulus package that shifted its growth engine to debt-backed state investment, which arguably caused saturation and overcapacity in the construction and related sectors, which have been addressed through recent economic policy changes. Under Xi Jinping, facing global uncertainties (e.g., trade war with the US, COVID-19, hot wars and sanctions), China has adopted a dual circulation strategy, pursuing domestic and international circulation in parallel, with the former being at the core (Lin 2021). China has intensified its international partnerships with the Global South and diversified away from developed nations.

Westerners who took advantage of China's opportunities also promoted "Wandel durch Handel" (change through trade), but they were baffled a few decades later when China didn't follow their expectations. Whyte (2009) wrote about the "four paradoxes" of China's economic miracle, which have defied mainstream economics thinking in the West. First, China overcame a century-long decline and failures. Second, it implemented socialist market reform without a big bang (as in other socialist economies). Third, while facilitating market and state fluctuations, the CPC never relinquished control of the economy. Paradoxically, the CPC has integrated China into the global economy by forcing global capital to be a junior partner (e.g., via majority Chinese-owned

joint ventures and containing liberalization in Special Economic Zones). Fourth, China explicitly rejected Western-led institutional reforms (the Washington consensus) and the primacy of private property rights.

Nevertheless, China's success has come at a high cost: inequality has worsened, labor standards have dropped, the environment has deteriorated, and crony capitalists and corrupt officials have flourished. Any socialist government would be tarnished by these events. Successive Chinese leaders have tried to address them, but the Xi administration has taken the most explicit and consequential steps. For the first time since ROU, the CPC has framed China's principal contradiction as "unbalanced and inadequate development" vs "the people's ever-growing needs for a better life" (Wei 2018), acknowledging that while China has met the population's basic needs, its way of doing so has caused many other issues.

Instead of deciding on capitalism vs. socialism in China, Naughton (2017: 22) suggests that "even those who judge that the Chinese system today is not socialist might consider that the socialist ideal is still influential". He argues that it is obvious that CPC has the resources and intention to shape economic outcomes, whereas, while far from the proclaimed goals, China has been increasingly demonstrating that it is serious when it comes to tackling poverty and reducing inequality and becoming genuinely inclusive and representative of the majority of the Chinese people – even if it still has a long way to go to meet its proclamations (Naughton 2017). In recent years, the CPC has taken on emerging IT tycoons and monopolistic behaviors by tech giants, and has grappled with the unbridled agenda-setting power of the financial sector, while reigning in the speculative real estate sector, even at the risk of destabilizing the domestic economy. All of that has been coupled with an ever closer scrutiny of foreign capital in the country (partially driven by geopolitical shifts) and ceasing to sacrifice the well-being of its people for investment (McGregor 2021). In conventional business terminology, China has lost some of its international competitiveness – but this entails improvement of the livelihood of its people (e.g. global investors complain about the wage increase in China, but higher wages are great news for Chinese workers).

Global China

The emergence of Global China has touched upon two interesting and somewhat contradictory tropes pertaining to socialism: the question of imperialism and hegemony-seeking, and the question of changing and transforming the global order.

In the 1960s, China broke with the Soviet Union because it saw it as an imperial force that brutally interfered in socialist states' internal affairs. Deng once said that if China becomes hegemonistic, the Chinese and other peoples should overthrow it. Though explicit anti-imperialism has been abolished, Chinese leaders still base their policies on anti-hegemonism and non-interventionism. However, China is a global actor with ever-denser relations with an

ever-growing number of countries, including under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and its size affects others in different ways. Debates on its impacts are diverse (Pavličević, Talmacs 2022). In Africa, many welcome China's presence and contrast it to the legacy of Western (neo) colonizers, while others argue that China is exploiting developing countries and is a neocolonizer itself. It is often seen as a rising global superpower and an aspiring hegemon seeking to overthrow the incumbent one, the US.

More importantly, the US itself has embraced a perception of China as an aspiring rival, which has led Washington to pivot from engagement with China to extreme strategic competition, reinterpreting many issues in the world as part of this global power struggle (Chang 2023). In mimetical manner, China has been portrayed as a transgressor that threatens the liberal, rules-based order, which the US claims to uphold (Breuer, Johnston 2019). Paradoxically, as the US and other Western actors have taken anti-globalist positions (notably during the Trump presidency), China has vocally supported globalization, which has been linked to American supremacy.

But before even discussing globalization, the US-China relationship has a (hard) security component that is hard to overlook. The US is the world's leading military superpower with global alliances and strategic partnerships. China's rapid military buildup in the US and West is viewed with trepidation and as a call for strategic response. China's buildup is framed by a difficult regional landscape and US primacy; Beijing sees an incomplete territorial unification process (the Taiwan question) and unresolved territorial disputes (including with India and in the East and South China Seas). The US military has been physically present in the Pacific since the 1940s, bolstered by alliances and partnerships with China's maritime neighbors, and more recently, in response to perceived rising Chinese assertiveness, by global partnerships like the "Five Eyes" and the AUKUS. Beijing sees the US strategy in the Pacific (with India added in recent years, renamed "Indo-Pacific" by American diplomats) as encirclement, including the building of "island chains" around China (Erickson, Wuthnow 2016) and inducing all kinds of pressures. China's growing power in the region reinforces Western alarmism and hegemonistic behavior in countries with conflicting territorial claims. This makes China's neighborhood a flashpoint, especially given global instability after the Ukraine and Middle East wars 2022-2023. China is a hot geopolitical issue beyond its borders, as the Trump administration has labeled it a threat to US national security and called for the world to choose between Washington and Beijing, with the Biden administration following course.

US-China power struggles are more complex and unpredictable due to blurred and intertwined interdependence beyond geopolitical division. Since the 1972 rapprochement, leading American and other multinationals have raced to enter the Chinese market. China's strategic "keeping a low profile" after 1989 gave the impression that it would be content with being a successful "player" and not change the rules of the game. Up until the 2010s, China prioritized business relations with Western capitalist economies and integration into

global capital networks and institutions, with its 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization having a major impact. In fact, this period of China ‘constructively’ integrating in global capitalism have been so consequential, that the contemporary shifts in thinking in the West retrospectively reframe them as naive mistakes on its behalf (Rosen 2018) – the belief, for a long time, has been that global capitalism will change China as, the opposite has taken place – China has changed global capitalism and has changed the West – e.g. today, in reaction to China, Western countries talk industrial policies and propose their own infrastructural megaprojects to compete with Beijing (Van Apeldoorn, De Graaff 2022). In this sense, China even though growing through and into the system of Western globalization, has also managed to transform it.

The 2008-2009 global financial crisis (GFC) was the inflection point. Given the performance of China and other emerging economies in Asia, it is clear that the crisis was more Western than global. GFC’s material and ideational effects in the West have been felt ever since, possibly forever changing Western politics and societies. China launched a new pro-active global agenda aimed at developing, post-colonial, transitional, and crisis-struck countries (i.e., the majority of the world), inspired by its successful handling of the GFC and seeing openings as the West has gone into economic retreat (embodied by austerity) and the Western narrative of globalization has faced legitimacy crisis (Vangeli 2018). China has tangible economic interests to do so, from diversifying its economic partnerships (the fruits are borne today, as China first traded more with developing countries in 2023) to exporting overcapacity and globally integrating Chinese political and economic actors that have not had such opportunities before. Loosely coordinated while often competing with each other, the flock of Chinese actors that have participated in the new pro-active foreign policy have been cautiously viewed, and China’s true motivations have been questioned.

In retrospect, many BRI endeavors were pre-existing (Pantucci 2016), and China’s state-led economy was already globalizing, but the BRI’s grandeur and boldness changed perception. China’s global narratives changed from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievement” as Chinese actors embraced the role of “responsible stakeholders” (Pu 2016). Chinese leaders have begun to market their development experience as a source of lessons for others (Gitter 2017; An 2017), voice opinions on global issues and conflicts, and signal an end to self-containment and a bid to make globalization more “inclusive” (W. Liu, Dunford, Gao 2018). This is coupled with calls for multipolarization and empowering the Global South, home to most of the world’s population, by launching the three Global Initiatives for Development, Security, and Civilization in 2022. China had created a variety of mechanisms and institutions, including the BRICS+, which counterbalances the G7, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a security pact in Eurasia, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Development Bank, which seek to create a new global financial order. By making international transfers in renminbi instead of dollars and promoting it as a foreign reserve currency, China has been globalizing

its currency. China, a rising global power, has maintained close ties with Russia during the Ukraine War (while remaining nominally neutral and offering a peace plan) and emerged as an unlikely but successful peace actor in the Saudi-Iran dispute, while vocally supporting a ceasefire and two-state solution for Israel and Palestine.

A socialist country, in that sense, is expected to work towards changing the status quo. Yet, despite how disruptive of an actor it has been, China has simultaneously worked through the institutions of the established order and even guarded it when its founders challenged it. As Trump was inaugurated in January 2017 and waging war on globalism (by promoting an America-first agenda), Xi Jinping spoke to the world business and political elite in Davos about the shared destiny of humanity and China's stakes and role in safeguarding globalization, despite globalization's shortcomings. China has embraced the UN and wants to grow its role. Though it is often accused of unfair trade practices, it relies on the World Trade Organization to protect trade relations and calls for upholding international law (as opposed to the "rules-based order", the meme spread by US diplomacy). It has worked closely with Bretton Woods's institutions as a shareholder, not a junior partner. These developments cast China in a less revolutionary light than it may seem. While working to transform the global landscape, its strategy to build socialism is a continuation of its historical trajectory of rising "into the global system" (Wang 2015) and being heavily dependent on the structures the West has built, which had paradoxically helped dismantle state socialism elsewhere.

Lessons Learned: Yugo-Chinese Intersections

China's agility and ability to learn and draw lessons have helped it rise under CPC rule. The learning-based experimental trial-and-error approach made CPC a keen observer of global affairs and a student of foreign lessons, which it adapts to the Chinese context (Shambaugh 2009). CPC adopted Marxism-Leninism from abroad and Sinified it. Soon after the People's Republic was founded in 1949, China became a Soviet student. Other socialist and non-socialist countries became important sources of knowledge after the Sino-Soviet split, especially during Reform and Opening Up (Halpern 1985; Marsh 2003; Gewirtz 2017). CPC had invited foreign experts from all over the world and from all ideological backgrounds to share their insights and advice, including the neo-liberal guru Milton Friedman, and had sent its cadres on learning trips around the world to share their knowledge with their comrades at home. Under Hu Jintao, the Central Committee started having regular study sessions with leading experts. Under Xi Jinping, China has been strengthening its research capacities, particularly the role of think tanks and research institutes that study global affairs and other areas (Menegazzi 2018).

Among the many sources of knowledge, Socialist Yugoslavia has been one of the most important but also most overlooked objects of study and reference of the CPC. After all, Yugoslavia was distant, and much smaller, and much less

consequential actor than the Soviet Union. Yet, if China is a contemporary “Red Swan,” then one could also argue that socialist Yugoslavia, in its own right, resembled a form of exception and deviation that had defied common sense back in its heyday; with the provision that given its minuscule size, it had an outsize impact on global affairs. Yugoslavia’s autonomous liberation struggle, its emergence as standalone socialist state outside the Eastern Bloc, and the pursuit of a sui generis developmental and geopolitical trajectory have had an impact beyond its borders, with its example reverberating across Global South countries (Stubbs 2023), but also Western social democracies – and in particular, in China. Then, the sad demise of Socialist Yugoslavia and the tragic wars in the 1990s, and the unraveling of its leftovers (including the 1999 NATO military intervention) left a deep imprint on how the global public – including China – has come to understand global affairs.

While from a contemporary Chinese vantage point Yugoslavia stands primarily as a metaphor of negative lessons and fate that needs to be avoided by all means (Brusadelli 2023), it is also seen with a great deal of sympathy which echoes selected historical episodes when Yugoslavia was considered a fraternal nation and a positive role model in building modern socialist system. There is, after all, a good reason why former Yugoslav countries are becoming more appealing for Chinese “red tourism” (Talmacs, forthcoming) – that is, tourism in historical sites of importance for the global socialist struggles – and why cultural linkages are being restored. Anecdotal evidence of everyday interactions in China also corroborates the notion that older Chinese generations speak fondly of Yugoslavia, with a certain dose of their own version of Yugo-nostalgia (which, importantly, sometimes conflates SFRY and FRY and contemporary Serbia). But ultimately, the Yugo-narrative in China is political. As China deals with the challenge of refining its “socialism in power” and navigating the contradictions of its socialist market experiment, the legacy of Yugoslavia’s experience remains a reminder of the immense difficulty of striking a balance between agility needed to reform and stability needed to survive, between centralization of power needed to streamline and coordinate and local autonomy needed to implement policies. The Chinese understanding of Yugoslavia’s dissolution has instilled in the CPC a deep sense of anxiety about the complexities of governing multi-ethnic society, but also fears about potential malicious foreign involvement, while also disillusioning Beijing about the nature of the post-1991 global order.

Historically, Yugoslavia has emerged as an object of interest for the CPC due to the resemblance and intersections between the Yugoslav and the Chinese revolutionary trajectories and national liberation struggles. It is no accident that “Walter brani Sarajevo” is one of the most popular foreign movies to be ever shown to Chinese movie-goers, which still is an important cultural reference in China today (Yee 2020). However, initially, the story started the other way around: it was China who played a particularly inspiring role of the Yugoslav national liberation struggle and socialist revolution, as Tito and the comrades had looked with particular fondness and interest towards China (Pirjevec,

2023). Yet, as the Sino-Yugoslav relationship became ever more complicated in the period 1949-1977, Yugoslavia's interest in China decreased; by the time Chinese reformers flocked to Yugoslavia in the late 1970s, the relationship was asymmetrical with the Chinese side being the driver of the interaction.

Yugoslavia was a consequential actor for China ever since 1948, shaping its understanding on geopolitics, hegemony and empire (see Stopić forthcoming). The Yugo-Soviet split has been one of the most significant external political events that has shaped the global outlook of the CPC, and as such a subject of great reflection in China. From the vantage point of today, the Yugo-Soviet split paved the way for China to follow in Yugoslavia's footsteps and embrace an anti-imperial, anti-hegemonistic stance towards Moscow in the 1960s, as Yugoslav diplomats had foreseen that sooner or later it would happen (Pirjevec 2023). However, the initial reaction of China at the time was the opposite, as in the 1950s it had been highly critical of Yugoslavia while doubling down on its partnership and reliance on the Soviet Union, encapsulated in the "leaning on one side" grand strategy (that, among other things led to its involvement in the Korean war). Such decision combined pragmatism with ideology – as in the aftermath of the Yugoslav rejection the Soviet Union was becoming belligerent towards traitors in the socialist world, Mao had a reputation of potentially becoming an Asian version of Tito (Y. Li 2023); thus Mao had the incentive to provide a different example and prove loyalty to Stalin. Ideologically, much of the internal developments in China were geared towards avoiding Yugoslav-style revisionism and corruption, which was later one of the main targets of the Cultural Revolution. Yet, the Sino-Soviet split had helped bring China and Yugoslavia together. A full rapprochement however, only took place with the two landmark bilateral visits, of Tito to China in 1977, and Hua Guofeng to Yugoslavia in 1978. As the two countries were also pursuing parallel relations of non-aligned cooperation with the Global South, competition and learning were intertwined.

By the late 1970s, Chinese public discourse treated Yugoslavia primarily as a bold geopolitical actor and an ally in the anti-imperial struggle against the Soviet Union; however, just as China was to start reforms, it gradually reframed Yugoslavia as a successful case of economic transformation (Zhou 2023). China started to pursue intense relations at all levels of the hierarchy and across different policy sectors, taking note of how Yugoslavs ran their economy. The idiosyncratic nature of the Yugoslav system was an important asset; the conceptualization of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" has echoed Tito's 1948 position that each country has the right "to proceed on the path to socialism according to its own experiences, traditions and needs" (Pirjevec 2023: 74). However, Yugoslavia was never seen one-dimensionally and uncritically: as Chinese got to know it better, they also saw some cautionary signs, too.

Like in Yugoslavia, Chinese market reform was to be achieved by "devolving authority and resources to local officials", although unlike in Yugoslavia where the legislature was a key policymaking arena, in China policymaking competences remained firmly anchored within the party-state bureaucracy; in China

there was also awareness about potential negative trends towards hyper-localism (Shirk 2023). Workers' self-management was particularly appealing, until *Solidarność* emerged in Poland – after which, China looked to strengthen the role of managers (Shirk 2023). However, one of the key voices in the reform and opening up, Jiang Yiwei was arguing for enterprise-based economy based on the Yugoslav example, although it was Deng himself who look to empower managers rather than workers (Naughton 1995: 101–108).

As the CPC also sought a way to redefine socialist governance and socialism in power, its internal debates on relationship between central authority and local autonomy mirrored Yugoslavia's own dilemmas; which in effect is one of the key questions for any socialist state and the practice of socialism in power (i.e. where should this power be located, and how concentrated it should be). Initially, the rather decentralized Yugoslav system – both of political and economic governance – seemed to offer promising solutions, but as Chinese policymakers got more acquainted with the realities of Yugoslavia including internal disparities and quarrels between different federal units, decentralization lost its appeal. Preserving the concentration of power at the center had been a key pillar of what has been termed a “neo-conservative” stream of thinkers within CPC as of the 1980s, which has included Wang Huning (Chen 1997), one of the closest confidants of Xi Jinping and a member of the current Standing Committee – who had been an outspoken critic of Yugoslav extensive decentralization (Wang as cited in Brusadelli, forthcoming). The question of where power is located also concerns the role of the leader – the uncertainty following Tito's death was a reminder that orderly leadership succession must be achieved. There were lessons drawn also in terms of transgressions of state power - Djilas's *New Class* despite its harsh criticism of China has been part of the anti-corruption curriculum of Xi's anti-corruption czar in the 2010s, Wang Qishan (Chou Wiest 2014).

Notwithstanding ideological criticism, since the rapprochement and until its dissolution, Yugoslavia was seen with a degree of kinship. Therefore, the end of Yugoslavia – and the descending into the civil wars of the 1990s – was a highly traumatic event for China, and in particular, for the generation of scholars, policymakers, cultural workers and managers that were part of the exchanges in the 1980s. Yet, the manner in which Yugoslavia dissolved only added weight to the negative lessons learned: Yugoslavia was too decentralized, inequalities between republics were high; the federation lacked a strong sense of national identity while being lax on ethnic nationalisms and separatism, and the League of Socialists was too weak (Brusadelli, forthcoming). However, in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, China also saw that external pressures and impulses can have a major destabilizing effects. This line of thinking intensified by 1999 when the NATO intervention against FR Yugoslavia took place, during which the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade was bombed as well, and the subsequent secession of Kosovo. The CPC saw these events as a violation of international law, and a display of American hegemonism as well as belligerence; the bitter experience served as a wake-up call and prompted a much more serious reflection on how

China will handle its relationship with the US that seemed poised to sooner or later, lead to friction, if not conflict (Doshi 2021; Gries 2005).

In sum, some of the key aspects of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” today, without taking into account the parallels and learning experiences from Yugoslavia. China’s boldness to experiment with socialist market economy has drawn on both the positive and negative lessons from Yugoslavia. Fine-tuning decentralism was crucial for unleashing the economic potentials while at the same time, China has tried to avoid the political consequences of decentralizing too much. Its anti-hegemonism coupled with pro-active but reform-oriented work through the global system echoes the Yugoslav thinking beyond bloc politics. The cautionary tales of the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation have been important factors in developing a rather firm approach of matters of ethnic diversity. And the geopolitical reading of the dissolution of Yugoslavia has greatly shaped China’s view of the post-1991 world. The impact of Yugoslavia, not be exaggerated, provides valuable and novel context for understanding the global diffusion of socialist ideas and practices.

Global China’s Footprint in the “Desert of Post-socialism”

Yugo-Chinese history also provides an additional context and backdrop that helps in understanding the burgeoning contemporary relations between China and the Yugoslav successor states in the aftermath of GFC. The former Yugoslav countries have since 2011 been involved in the landmark China-led platform for cooperation with Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE) dubbed 16+1 (then expanding to 17+1, and finally shrinking to 14+1), that was in 2013 subsumed as a leg and laboratory of the BRI (Vangeli 2017; 2020). All indicators of economic cooperation has since increased substantially, and so have interactions between the two sides – which at times had glowingly referred to the interactions in the past. Of course, the context today is much different than ever before – the former Yugoslav countries are just small states at the global landscape that do not carry the weight that Yugoslavia once had, and despite their varying degrees of prosperity, they are all dependent capitalist economies (even Slovenia, after the GFC, had moved towards such trajectory) (Magnin, Nenovsky 2022). Nevertheless, they offer an important insight in how “socialism with Chinese characteristics” operates overseas, and helps add context on the question of China and globalization.

Global China in the former Yugoslav region has emerged as somewhat disruptive actor, or at least as an agenda re-setter. As the numerous reports on “Chinese influence” in the post-Yugoslav countries have been piling up, it is safe to say that no one could not have predicted only a decade ago that China would play such a significant role in the debate on the Balkans today. Its endeavors in the region have been aimed at creating conditions and pursuing economic cooperation, and imbued with an element of amity not least due to the fact that Beijing perceives countries from the (semi)periphery differently than it perceives countries from the global core (Vangeli 2020). Moreover, how

Beijing has approached the former Yugoslav countries is different than how the EU and the US have done so: within Chinese-led initiatives, they had received an equal treatment and a distinguished seat at the table, in contrast to being seen as pupils that to improve their performance by the West; this also goes for the post-Yugoslav EU member states as well (although the pressures have been much more visible and consequential in the EU candidate countries).

More substantially, while socialist overtures are not immediately identifiable in how their cooperation has been framed, China has engaged the former Yugoslav countries in a context that is based on the idea of remedying the shortcomings and injustices of the Western-led globalization parentheses, which is a cause that many socialists would in principle sympathize with. In practice, China has promoted a state-led approach to economic cooperation that has diverged from the post-1991 liberal pro-free market blueprints accepted in the region, but nevertheless, as centered on the state, has put ruling political elites as primary stakeholders of the cooperation. From a socialist theoretical standpoint this idea holds merit, however given the propensity for transgressive behavior of post-Yugoslav elites, its application into practice has not led to extending the fruits of the cooperation towards the broader society, while raising numerous potential corruption and governance risks. This is accompanied by the mantras of “mutual benefit” and “win-win outcomes” proliferated by Chinese actors – however, it is important to note that the Chinese win-win framework has a very distinctive transactional logic, rather than a socialist one: while value for the host country is to be generated through different forms of economic cooperation, China also has to have a clear benefit from the cooperation. Thus, transactionalism has helped China move forward in the region, as post-Yugoslav countries today speak the language of transactionalism much better than the one of socialism. They have embraced the narrative of the economic opportunities that China presents, but have sanitized it from any ideals of building a better world as put forth by China (Vangeli 2021). China has been only seen as a supplementary source of capital to aid them in their chosen trajectories. China itself has had no problem with this, as long as the pragmatic cooperation has been deepening.

The tangible outcomes of the economic cooperation between the former Yugoslav states (and in the first place here, “Western Balkan” countries) and China, nevertheless, tell variegated stories. The Zijin copper and gold mines in Bor, as well as the acquisition of the Smederevo steel mill by Hebei Steel in Serbia have been lauded as economic success stories that have boosted economic activity and created jobs (in the way transforming formerly losing companies into successful cases) – but have had grave environmental effects that have contributed to the rise of an environmentalist movements (Prelec 2021). Such investments, despite their profitability, also do not contribute significantly to economic upgrading and moving up the value chains. In the context of Chinese M&As Chinese managers and local workers have frictions (there have been complaints by Chinese managers that local workers behave as if they were still in Yugoslavia). The case of Shangdong Linglong’s FDI in Zrenjanin,

on the other hand, has been accompanied by labor issue scandals regarding to the abuse of posted workers from Southeast Asia (Matković 2022). Furthermore, thermal power plants in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have been lauded as important steps towards energy security, but this has meant burning more coal in the most polluted regions in Europe – although more recently, China has vowed to discontinue such practices; while we have seen the first Chinese wind farm being built in Bosnia and Herzegovina – the largest in the country (Žuvela 2023). These and other similar examples suggest that while some outcomes have been achieved, they have not gone against the trajectory of peripheralization of the Western Balkan countries.

China has also notably emerged as a key partner in upgrading the connective infrastructure in all Western Balkan countries (railway in Serbia, and highways in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia) and in Croatia (Pelješac Bridge). While in some cases Chinese companies won competitive international finance tenders, in others Chinese financial institutions funded projects that no one else wanted to fund. The political condition was that Chinese SOEs, with their successful track record, would lead the implementation of these projects. The infrastructure gap in the region is one of the key reasons for the underdevelopment and marginalization, recognized under any paradigm of economic development, be it liberal or socialist. While Sino-Balkan cooperation raised issues typical for infrastructure development on the project management side, there have been additional major concerns about potential “debt traps” – although the concept has been thoroughly debunked (Brautigam 2020). Yet, the lack of financial prudence and the emergence of corruptions scandals, while not negating the value and achievements of these projects, have cast a shadow on the integrity of the cooperation. Most importantly, however, there has so far not been a visible domestic agenda on how to utilize the new infrastructure towards sustainable growth, which would effectively mirror China’s own example of synergizing infrastructure development with industrialization. This, when we speak about China in the region we still speak of scattered projects rather than of having moved forward with the Chinese vision for regional development (Vangeli 2020b).

The cooperation between former Yugoslav countries and China, nevertheless has been met with intense resistance by the US and the EU, both in terms of rhetoric and actual policy maneuvers. Significantly, in response to China, they have pivoted to brick and mortar development and tired to offer competing packages. They have been more successful however in areas where they could use their restrictive potential, such as in technological cooperation, which is now a subject of national security discussions. Therefore, new Post-Yugo-Chinese relations, just like the ones during the Cold War, have unveiled against a backdrop of complex geopolitics, which at this point it seems will be somewhat of a constraint on future developments.

The state-led approach promoted by China and the normative charge aimed at remedying the injustices caused by Western-led globalization, in their own right, could be interpreted as having an underlying socialist tendency. Yet, the

impulse by the governments in the region and the modalities through which ideas translate into practice on the Chinese side, rather reflect pragmatic approach – it is for instance, the overt pragmatism, rather than any ideological component of socialism of the relationship, that has triggered geopolitical backlash. And while the support of infrastructure development could be seen favorably from a socialist perspective, the net effect of Chinese FDI is still problematic.

In sum, under the complex geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations that accompany the debate on the role of China in the Balkans, are there any visible traces of socialism in the Post-Yugo-Chinese relations today? China, with all the risks it brings to the region, provides an additional option and opportunity for the former Yugoslav countries, and establishes itself as a force that helps partially counterbalance the ills of neoliberal development, which, if handled properly – meaning, if consolidated domestic institutions can get China to invest in renewables rather than in coal, invest in value-added rather than cheap and dirty industries, and provide a sustainable vision for how to utilize infrastructure projects, then China can contribute to common goods and common well-being in the region. Given the socio-economic predicaments the Yugoslav successor states face, a somewhat Dengist approach towards China could be perhaps the way forward: regardless if it is red or not, if the cat can help them catch some mice, post-Yugoslav progressives and socialists should engage with it. However, some early Mao common sense needs to be brought for a good measure: before dealing with any guests, they need to put their house in order first.

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Anastas Vangeli

Globalna Kina, (bivša) Jugoslavija i socijalizam

Apstrakt

Ovaj članak utemeljuje proučavanje socijalizma u Narodnoj Republici Kini (NRK) kroz kritičku analizu moći, kapitalizma i globalnu ulogu. Upravljanje Komunističke partije Kine (KPK) obiluje paradoksima u oblikovanju posebnog socijalističkog modela koji posmatrači sa Zapada često smatraju izazovnim za shvatanje, karakterišući ga kako inkluzivnim institucionalnim inovacijama, tako i autoritarnom prisilom; iskorišćavanje moći države u postizanju pravičnijih ekonomskih rezultata i reprodukovanje nepravednih kapitalističkih društvenih stvarnosti; te osmišljavanje alternativa hegemonij neoliberalnoj globalizaciji dok radi na očuvanju postojećeg stanja i institucija na kojima počiva. Ovaj kompleksni kineski model proizvod je eksperimentisanja i učenja; neki od naučenih lekcija potiču iz interakcije i razmišljanja o socijalističkoj Jugoslaviji, čiji je primer bio ključan u tome kako je Kina navigirala kroz geopolitičke kompleksnosti i sprovela reforme. Međutim, u kontekstu interakcije između Globalne Kine i globalne (polu)periferije, kao i na primeru savremenih odnosa Kine sa zemljama bivše Jugoslavije, materijalne ishode oblikuju pre geoeconomika razmatranja nego socijalistički ideali.

Ključne reči: Kina, Jugoslavija, socijalizam, globalizacija, interakcije