

Jelena Gledić¹
University of Belgrade
Faculty of Philology
Department of Oriental Studies

SINO-SERBIAN CULTURAL TIES: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Abstract: The general history of Sino-Yugoslav relations has been well-researched in the past few decades, and recently, there has been a proliferation of studies on the cooperation between China and Serbia focusing on the 21st century. However, cultural cooperation has been underresearched, with few attempts to systematically analyze its history and understand its significance for present and future bilateral relations. This paper aims to fill that knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive overview of the history of Sino-Serbian cultural ties. Serbia has become one of China's closest partners in Europe, and the narrative of a so-called "Ironclad Friendship" between the two countries emerged, embedding political and socio-economic cooperation within a cultural and historical milieu. This makes research on Sino-Serbian cultural ties important not only for the humanities and social sciences but also for the practical realm of foreign policy and geopolitics.

This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of culture in international relations through a qualitative comparative analysis of primary sources in Serbian and Chinese (bilateral agreements, cultural policy papers, etc.) and a secondary literature review. The results are examined and synthesized to highlight changes over time and to evaluate the linkages between political and socio-economic relations and cultural cooperation.

Keywords: *China, Serbia, cultural ties, international relations, Iron Friendship.*

1. Introduction

The general history of Sino-Yugoslav relations has been well-researched in the past few decades (see e.g. Čavoški, 2008; 2009; 2013; Arežina, 2013; 2020; Radović,

¹jelenagledic@gmail.com

2021; Stopić et al., 2023; Vangeli & Pavličević, 2025). Also, in the past decade, there has been a proliferation of studies on the cooperation between China and Serbia focusing on the 21st century, especially the economic relations and geopolitical implications in the context of Serbia's position in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Pavličević, 2015; 2018; 2019; Dimitrijević, 2017; 2018; 2020; Gledić, 2020; 2021; 2024; 2025; 2026). However, cultural cooperation has been underresearched, with only several focused studies (e.g., Zhang, 2022; Bogojević, 2025) and a few attempts to systematically analyze its history and understand its significance for present and future bilateral relations (for early approaches, see, e.g., Vukićević, 1993; more recently, Trailović, 2021). This paper aims to fill that knowledge gap by providing a comprehensive comparative overview of the history of Sino-Serbian cultural ties².

It is important to first situate this study in the general history of Sino-Serbian relations. Perhaps unsurprisingly due to historical circumstances and the geographical distance, there is no recorded official contact between China and Serbia prior to the mid-20th century. China was an empire that mostly engaged with its neighbors and occasionally European great powers from ancient times until it became a republic in 1911. Serbia was recognized as a kingdom in the 13th century but was then conquered and ruled by the Ottoman Empire until it regained its independence in the first half of the 19th century. Starting from the early 19th to the early 20th century, there was some interest by individuals to approach and understand the other culture as chronicled in travelogues and newspapers, however, official ties started after the establishment of the People's Republic of China³ in

² This paper is part of a wider study and derived from the author's PhD thesis, "Cultural Ties and Bilateral Relations: Sino-Serbian Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative" (Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU, 2025).

³ Following decades of conflict between China's Nationalist and Communist parties, the communist People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, with its capital in Beijing governing so-called mainland China. Those supporting the Republic of China, ruled by the Nationalist Party, moved to Taiwan and continued governing from Taipei. Generally speaking, Beijing had the support of other communist and non-aligned countries, while Taipei had the support of anti-communist powers including keeping China's seat in the United Nations (UN) Security Council for two decades. Interestingly, prior to the establishment of the PRC there seems to have been a push from the Soviet Union to support the Nationalist Party government in Beijing, which Yugoslavia did by providing diplomatic recognition in 1947, however following a visit from representatives of China's Communist Party to Belgrade in the same year the recognition was never officially announced and remains a "forgotten episode" of Sino-Yugoslav relations (Čavoški, 2006). In terms of the PRC's global standing, in the 1970s there was a major shift and it established diplomatic relations with most so-called Western countries and took over the UN seat in 1971. The Taipei government claims independence from the PRC until today, albeit with internal political discussions and friction on this matter, while Beijing advocates the One China policy that considers Taiwan a part of the sovereign state under the name China, i.e. that there is only one China. This issue remains a source of tension both in so-called

1949, through the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia⁴ part of which was Serbia as one of its six socialist republics.

From the start, the official ties between the two countries were affected by turbulent international and national politics – primarily the context of the Cold War and the ambitions of both countries' leaders (cf. Vangeli & Pavličević, 2025). Yugoslavia was one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China after its founding in 1949, but official diplomatic relations were only established in 1955 due to conflicts with the Soviet Union. At the same time, China's leader, Mao Zedong, and the Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito, criticized each other's approach to socialism and tried to be the authorities on the correct interpretation of how it should be implemented. Tito did not visit China until 1977, after Mao's death, but then the Chinese leadership sought to normalize relations as China reformed. After that, the two countries maintained generally stable relations, rooted in pragmatic diplomacy and occasional economic contacts. China continued its diplomatic relations with Serbia during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the 1999 NATO military intervention marked a turning point in the strengthening of political ties. In the 21st century, socio-economic cooperation expanded through the establishment of a strategic partnership, particularly through Serbia's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and in the China-Central and Eastern European Countries cooperation mechanism (initially called the 16+1). Major Chinese-backed projects in Serbia include transport infrastructure, energy, and mining, coupled with increased political cooperation. At the level of political discourse, Serbia also became one of China's closest partners in Europe, and the narrative of a so-called "Ironclad Friendship" between the two countries emerged, embedding political and socio-economic cooperation within

cross-strait relations (across the Taiwan Strait) and globally in terms of maintaining diplomatic relations with Beijing and Taipei.

⁴Yugoslavia generally refers to the country that was established after World War I as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and then changed its name and borders several times until its breakup in 1992. After World War II, Yugoslavia had a communist government but pursued its own form of socialism and was one of the founders of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961. Its six socialist republics were Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (with two autonomous provinces – Kosovo and Vojvodina) and Slovenia. The capital and largest city of Yugoslavia was Belgrade, the current capital of Serbia. Although the wars that established new borders lasted throughout the 1990s, with some territorial disputes remaining to this date, it is generally considered that Yugoslavia stopped existing in 1992 when a rump state consisting of only Serbia and Montenegro was formed under the name Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Following a decade of pressure from international organizations, the country changed its name to Serbia and Montenegro in 2003. The issue of legal and cultural succession remains a source of tension both in the former Yugoslav territories and globally in terms of managing the continuity of diplomatic relations.

a cultural and historical milieu. This makes research on Sino-Serbian cultural ties important not only for the humanities and social sciences but also for the practical realm of foreign policy and geopolitics.

2. Methodological framework

In terms of the theoretical framework, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of the role of culture in international relations, building on the author's previous work (Gledić, 2019; 2021). The study aims to build on Christian Reus Smit's theory on cultural diversity (2018), i.e. how cultural differences can be effectively managed to build or maintain order. Viewing culture as inherently heterogeneous and complex, Reus Smit's theory posits that institutions should actively manage and organize cultural diversity rather than attempt to neutralize or institutionalize differences. In the context of bilateral relations, this translates into top-down management of cultural ties to maintain or facilitate cooperation.

In the present research, it is also important to highlight China's approach to cultural diplomacy over the past few decades. Since the 1990s, China has actively and increasingly engaged in promoting its culture abroad, and cultural diplomacy – the exchange of ideas, values, traditions, and other aspects of culture to strengthen relationships with other countries and promote national interests – has become a significant pillar of its foreign policy. China's cultural diplomacy endeavors have been interpreted as an important means to enhance its global image and influence, strengthen its attractiveness (so-called soft power), and create a favorable international environment that supports its rise as a global power (see e.g. Shambaugh, 2013). China has even introduced a new concept of cultural soft power, openly aiming to project a consistent, attractive image of the country internationally by embedding elements of what they deem Chinese traditional culture and values into education, art, sports, and other areas (for an in-depth analysis of the evolution of this concept and the interplay of the notion of soft power and public diplomacy on the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Stević, 2021). In these efforts, China claims to be, on the one hand, reinforcing national cohesion while, on the other hand, offering an alternative perspective to the global community and promoting cultural pluralism (Stević, 2022). Importantly, through using traditional Chinese culture and values as a resource in public diplomacy, the Chinese government is reifying its interpretation of traditional Chinese civilization.

Two prominent examples illustrate well the curation of China's public image for national and international audiences. First, in 2004, China launched the Confucius

Institute program, establishing and managing cultural centers abroad to promote Chinese language and culture while also creating language-teaching resources and providing teacher training in China. The number of these centers grew quickly across the globe, and at the same time, they drew criticism in some parts of the world for allegedly disseminating propaganda from the Chinese Communist Party (e.g., Paradise, 2009), even though they primarily promoted language and traditional arts (Ren, 2012). Confucius Institutes function similarly to other national culture centers, and the previously already existing Chinese Cultural Centers, but due to their unique operating mode (through partnerships with foreign universities and educational institutions) and China's geopolitical position, they have been seen as a key resource of China's cultural diplomacy (Hartig, 2012). A second example is the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Through this event, China aimed to promote to the world Confucian values such as harmony (Chen et al., 2012) and a complex, culturally diverse nationalism (cf. Leibold, 2010). On the local front, the Olympics were an opportunity for a several-year-long campaign to promote the revival of what were considered traditional Chinese values to the Chinese public.

The outlined Chinese approach to cultural diplomacy indicates a proactive, top-down approach to culture and cultural diversity in recent decades, consistent with the theoretical framework stated above. However, this has not been the case throughout the history of Sino-Serbian cultural ties. The present study uses a qualitative comparative approach to map Sino-Serbian cultural ties from the first contacts to the present day, combining analysis of primary sources in Serbian and Chinese (bilateral agreements, cultural policy papers, etc.) with a secondary literature review. The results are examined and synthesized to highlight changes over time and to evaluate the linkages between political and socio-economic relations and cultural cooperation. The following sections first outline the early unofficial contacts, then the cooperation while Serbia was part of Yugoslavia, with a separate section on community ties, and finally, developments in the past few decades under the new, proactive approach.

3. Early cultural ties

From medieval times to the 20th century, the cultural ties between China and Serbia seem to have been unidirectional and indirect. While there are currently no records, Chinese goods and technology likely reached the Balkan peninsula via Silk Road trade routes, through intermediaries such as the Byzantine Empire and other regional powers. China is mentioned in a Serbian biographical text in the context

of battles in Asia as early as the early 15th century (Pjević, 2020). More detailed texts appeared in the 18th century: China is mentioned as one of the great ancient civilizations where science had an important societal role in seminal Enlightenment texts by Zaharija Orfelin and Dositej Obradović. The 19th century brought about detailed information about the society and culture of China in Serbian geography and history textbooks and magazines (Ibid.). These early writings discuss ancient China's contributions to the world, such as the production of silk, paper, printing, and gunpowder, as well as contemporaneous local customs, religion, and literature. The first literary translations of Chinese proverbs into Serbian appeared in the mid-19th century. This perception of China, however, was based on third-language sources. These early efforts represented an "although ingenious, still above all random, spontaneous and unsystematic interest" (*mada domišljatom ipak pre svega slučajnom, stihijskom i nesistematskom interesovanju*, Vukićević, 1993:p.157). Still, they conditioned the development of attitudes towards China in Serbia (Ibid.). To date, Serbian perceptions of China are often based on anecdotal information and remain inextricably intertwined with how China is perceived in third-language sources, most often English.

The first travelogues with first-person accounts of China were published in the late 19th and early 20th century,⁵ alongside the appearance of the first studies and reports by Serbian scholars trying to understand China, primarily in the context of its relations with foreign powers and vis-à-vis a rising Japan (Vukićević, 1993). While Serbian newspapers reporting on 19th-century events in China used different words to denote the country – *Hineska*, *Hina*, *Kitaj*, *Čina* – the term used today, *Kina*, appeared in early 20th-century writings, most notably in a study entitled "The spirit of Chinese culture and civilization." (*Duh Kineske kulture i civilizacije*, Radosavljević, 1923). In this first analysis of China in Serbian, Paja Radosavljević, a psychologist and pedagogue based in the USA, wrote about both the ancient empire and early 20th-century republican China as a positive model for the world and especially Slavic peoples, noting the civilizational similarities (Ibid.:p.975):

'The Spirit of the Chinese civilization and culture is very close to the Spirit of our Slavic culture. That is why I think it could be useful to also say a few words about the psychology of a race that is at the same time a living witness of both old

⁵The first travelogue in Serbian is said to be from 1895, by Milan Jovanović Morski, but in the early 18th century a Serbian count, Sava Vladislavić, became a diplomat of the Russian court and had a significant role in their relations with China (Pjević, 2020). He wrote detailed reports about his time in China, which were published in Russian in the 19th century and partially translated into Serbian in several books throughout the 20th century. The first known Serbian sinologist, Ozren Subotić, also studied Chinese language in Russia at the start of the 20th century (Ibid.).

age and youth. It is precisely we, the Slavs, who need to know this great people well, to whom we are perhaps closer in spirit than to any other people today.’

Duh kineske civilizacije i kulture veoma je blizak Duhu naše slovenske kulture. Zbog toga i mislim da nije na odmet ako se po koja progovori i o psihologiji rase koja je u jedan te isti mah živi svedok i starosti i mladosti. Baš mi Sloveni treba dobro da upoznajemo ovaj veliki narod kome smo po duši možda bliži nego li ikojem narodu u sadašnjici.)

Radisavljević also noted that what he perceives as the greatest virtue of the Chinese civilization is its consistency, and that this permanent continuity can offer more security to the Slavic people than what he called “the West” (Ibid.:p.962):

‘Of course, this is not to say that the Chinese civilization today is the best or the worst. But no one can deny that the Chinese civilization is the most constant. For a nation or a race that has seen Babylon, and Egypt, and old Hellas, and proud Rome rise, prosper, and die – the length of the Chinese's age must, therefore, be sufficient proof that Chinese institutions must have reached the security we search for in vain in the West.’

(Doduše, ovim neću da kažem niti da je kineska civilizacija danas najbolja niti da je ona najgora. Ali niko ne može poreći da je kineska civilizacija najstalnija. Jer nacija ili rasa koja je videla kako se diže, napreduje i izumire i Vavilon, i Egipat i stara Jelada i gordi Rim, – dužina veka Kineza mora, zbog toga biti dovoljan dokaz da su kineske institucije morale steći sigurnost koju uzalud tražimo na Zapadu.)

The author was writing about the republican China that emerged from the ancient empire, but the perception of deeply rooted cultural similarities between the peoples remains in today's discourse on the Sino-Serbian bilateral relationship. Conversely, the notion that China can be an alternative to the so-called West for Slavic peoples, i.e. Serbia, is interesting to compare to today's position and role of China in Serbia's foreign policy (cf. Gledić, 2024; 2025).

When it comes to Chinese sources, reports from ambassadors to Europe in the late Qing dynasty (late 19th/early 20th century) mention Serbia, using different versions of its name transcribed into Chinese (Zhang, 2022). The first Chinese travelogue from Serbia was also recorded in the first decade of the 20th century. During his travels through Europe, the famous Chinese political thinker and reformer Kang Youwei visited Belgrade and wrote about his experience and views of Serbia (Fidan & Jovanovic, 2015). There is some praise in his writings, for example, his admiration for the sense of nationality and succession of power from brother to brother, which he sees as a potential model for China, but he mostly describes

Serbia as a very small and poor country, in many ways unremarkable when compared to other countries. While there are some inaccuracies in his report, likely due to misunderstandings with the local guides (*Ibid.*), his approach foreshadows the inevitable discrepancies in mutual perceptions stemming from the vast historical and geographical differences between Serbia and China, which are evident to this day. Namely, on the one hand, China is viewed in Serbia through the lens of the several-thousand-year-long history of the Chinese empire and its current position as a global economic power; on the other hand, Serbia is viewed in China as a small, niche country, and most often discussed in the context of its region or Europe.

4. Sino-Yugoslav cultural ties

Sino-Serbian cultural exchanges in the first half of the 20th century were characterized by the occasional, unsystematic, and mostly subjective ties forged through third-language or personal perceptions and approaches – travelogues, studies, personal accounts, and translations, mostly on China in Serbian. However, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PRC and Yugoslavia, formal cultural cooperation also began, intensifying over the decades and gradually shaping informal ties, especially in the 21st century. Yugoslavia's cultural legacy is sometimes difficult to disaggregate, and it can be argued that its heritage should generally be viewed as a whole that belongs equally to all former Yugoslav republics. Still, some countries, and especially Serbia, have been successfully incorporating the Yugoslav period in the story of their bilateral relationship with China to facilitate present-day cooperation, as demonstrated in this section.

Culture played an important role in the Sino-Yugoslav relationship from the start of official bilateral relations in January 1955, with the mutual exchange of delegations representing national dance and music in the first half of the same year (Zhang, 2022). This continued over the next few years at an equal level: three Chinese and four Yugoslav folk music and dance troupes were dispatched from 1955 to 1958 (*Ibid.*), and the first bilateral agreement between the two countries, signed in 1957, was on cultural cooperation. As ideological differences hindered the development of the relationship in the next decade, culture seems to have been an acceptable medium to maintain and publicly reestablish the ties in the 1970s. Diplomatic efforts continued, and the second bilateral agreement, signed in 1972, was on civil air transport (MFA RS 2020), but in the year prior, the first Chinese dance troupe sent abroad after the Cultural Revolution visited, among other countries, Yugoslavia (Zhang, 2022).

In the 1970s and 1980s, cultural exchanges continued with mutual visits by artists, intellectuals, and political leaders, as well as the translation of literature and films. In Yugoslavia, China was present through both official cooperation – visits of troupes, Chinese cultural programs on state television etc., as well as individual efforts, reflected in a growing interest in Chinese martial arts, aspects of Chinese medicine, and translations of Chinese literature, still from third-language sources and mostly focused on so-called literary classics (Radulović et al., 2014; Bogojević, 2025). China Radio International, a Chinese state-owned international radio broadcaster with programs in more than 40 languages, started its Serbian language program focused on the territory of Yugoslavia in 1961, and in 1981 they opened an office in Belgrade (CRI 2019).

It should be noted, however, that Yugoslavia had a rich local art scene and that US and European culture were dominant, while China had a complex relationship to its cultural heritage,⁶ and Yugoslavia was one of the few countries with which it maintained friendly relations during the Sino-Soviet split. Thus, while there may have been more variety of Chinese culture present in Yugoslavia, in China, there was arguably a greater impact of Yugoslav culture. The Yugoslav World-War-Two-themed *Walter Defends Sarajevo* and *The Bridge* were among the first foreign films to be aired after the Cultural Revolution, and the mass screenings organized across the country supposedly shaped a generation of Chinese and remain popular to this date. There is ample anecdotal evidence that people from former Yugoslav territories are still asked about these films and are reminded of the Chinese-language version of the anti-fascist anthem *Bella Ciao*, which was featured in *The Bridge* (Gledić, 2020). Since the lead actor portraying Walter, Bata Živojinović, was Serbian, this Yugoslav cultural artifact was also used to promote Sino-Serbian cooperation over the past two decades, especially to support claims to the historical continuity of the so-called “Ironclad Friendship”.

5. Community ties

Regarding cross-cultural contact between communities, there are records of a Chinese soldier who arrived in Belgrade in 1921 while wearing a Serbian military

⁶One of the main messages of the Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 until 1976 was removing traditional elements from Chinese society, including culture. Through this process, the heritage of the ancient Chinese civilization was rejected, and it only started to be appreciated again in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, the art that was being produced mostly served ideological purposes, i.e. promoting Chinese socialism, and individual creative expression was not encouraged and was even suppressed.

uniform and applied to stay and live there (Bogdanović, 2021). He was a volunteer in the Russian army who joined Serbian soldiers on the Salonica front after the fall of the Russian Empire, but there is no research on his life after he was granted permission to stay in Serbia. The first group of people perceived as Chinese in Serbia were actually Kalmyk refugees who came to Belgrade after the Russian civil war in the first half of the 20th century (Milenković, 1998). They were a Russian national minority of Mongolian origin, but since they had Asian features and practiced Buddhism, they were considered by the local population to be Chinese. They built one of the first Buddhist temples in Europe in Belgrade and were well integrated into the local community, but the population emigrated after World War Two, i.e., due to the arrival of the Soviet Red Army.

After that, the first large wave of actually Chinese immigrants came to Serbia in the 1990s, which was coupled with conspiracy theories about the circumstances of their arrival (Gledić, 2020). Research shows that Hungary's abolishment of visa requirements for Chinese citizens in 1988 led to the arrival of around 40,000 immigrants in the span of only a few years, who mostly worked in the Chinese trading centre in Budapest, importing goods for all of Eastern Europe. However, after 1992, there was a pushback – stricter regulations were enforced, and changes in import procedures reduced profits, which led to the Hungarian Chinese population seeking other opportunities in the region. The Chinese traders gradually moved south, particularly after United Nations sanctions on Yugoslavia were lifted in 1996, with only around a quarter of that number remaining in Hungary. However, from the mid-1990s, and especially towards the end of Slobodan Milošević's authoritarian rule, local and global media speculated that the Chinese were brought into Yugoslavia as part of an agreement between Milošević's socialist regime and China. The idea behind this conspiracy theory is that China was happy to reduce its massive population, by some accounts even paying them to emigrate, while Milošević needed to secure votes in a time of political instability and amidst efforts to topple his regime. These speculations have long been discredited (see, e.g., Chang, 2013), but media reports of tens, and even hundreds of thousands, of Chinese being brought into Serbia as part of a political project still resonate in the public perception of China and the Chinese in Serbia (cf. Trklja, 2009).

The Chinese community in Serbia has been the subject of numerous studies, despite challenges in obtaining official information about them (cf. Chang, 2013; Gledić, 2020). The Chinese are said to be the largest foreign community in Serbia, accounting for around a quarter of the country's total immigration (Bobić & Babović, 2013), and this number is likely even larger today due to the mobility

of BRI project workers. However, the Chinese in Serbia mostly live in relatively isolated communities, with the vast majority involved in trade, and a much smaller percentage running restaurants, medical practices (offering traditional Chinese medicine), or agricultural businesses. In recent years, there has also been an influx of Chinese tourists and, consequently, more Chinese-run service industry businesses catering to them.

In the case of Serbians in China, while there is little research on the topic, there seems to be no communities formed, but rather individual migrants dispersed across the country (cf. Rađenović, 2016). Still, migration trends indicate an interesting change in the past decades (Ibid.). During the Yugoslav period, migrants were diplomatic, business, and sports personnel with relative social prominence, as well as students on state scholarships. However, in recent years and especially after the introduction of the visa-free regime, migration that is not governed by the states has increased, with large numbers of individuals seeking economic opportunities in China, often teaching sports or foreign languages in small cities. These individuals stay in China for several years, often learning only the basics of the local language, but they bring a new perspective on China to Serbia, sharing their firsthand experiences upon returning home. Given the rising number of Serbians working in China, this topic merits further research and should be explored in future studies.

6. Cultural ties at the turn of the 21st century

Cultural cooperation at the turn of the 21st century intensified, which was greatly facilitated by the groundwork laid in the Sino-Yugoslav period, i.e., bridging the language barrier through the establishment of degree programs in Beijing and Belgrade. In China, language was seen as a pragmatic tool, and establishing studies of Serbo-Croatian, as the official language of Yugoslavia was called at that time, at the Beijing Foreign Studies University in 1963 was primarily aimed at those who would engage in diplomacy, foreign trade, etc. (Wen, 2015). In Serbia, it was more the result of the individual interests of individuals who first started teaching Chinese language classes at the Kolarac People's University in 1971, which led to the establishment of the Chinese language major at the University of Belgrade a few years later (Vukićević, 1993). Several early dictionaries from this period are still available and in use. A Chinese-Serbo-Croatian dictionary was published in 1978 (Grujić, 1978). It was compiled using Russian and English dictionaries, so its usefulness is limited, but it also contains Chinese language lessons with basic dialogues. An extensive, 60,000-word Serbo-Croatian-Chinese dictionary was first

published in 1992, based on an earlier, more limited version (Xiao et al., 1997). As the state-to-state cooperation between Serbia and China intensified over the past few decades, language teaching greatly expanded in both countries – seven universities in China now offer a Serbian language major (in Shanghai, Guangdong, Tianjin, Jilin and three in Beijing), and in Serbia, in addition to the degree offered by the University of Belgrade, Chinese is taught through the Confucius Institutes in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš, as a major at the Belgrade Philological Gymnasium (established in the 1990s), and as an elective in many primary and secondary schools across Serbia following a pilot program established through a bilateral agreement in 2012 (MFA RS, 2020). Numerous new language-learning resources also exist, including those developed specifically for the Serbian-Chinese language pair, and a rising number of published books in translation from Chinese to Serbian and vice versa.

In the 1990s, cultural cooperation was affected by the economic and socio-political situation in Serbia following the breakup of Yugoslavia. The official ties remained open, but the cooperation was modest and mostly symbolic. Two significant events for the mutual cultural ties in this period were the arrival of a large Chinese migrant community to Serbia in the early 1990s and the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. The Chinese migrants facilitated cross-cultural contact between the two peoples, even though they never fully integrated into the host society. On the other hand, the shared experience of loss in 1999 is presented and perceived as a moment when an especially strong cultural bond was created between the two countries and two peoples (cf. Gledić, 2026).

In the 21st century, reflecting the intensification of socio-economic and political cooperation, collaborations in the field of culture, including education, sports, and tourism, also increased. Since 2008, the two countries' ministries of culture have begun signing bilateral agreements outlining multi-year programs of cultural cooperation, including mutual participation in art events, film festivals, and artist visits. Similar agreements were made by line ministries to regulate cooperation in the fields of education, science, and technology (MFA RS, 2020). With support from the two states, academic cooperation intensified, primarily in the natural and technical sciences, and Serbia's state universities focused on improving their rankings on China's university league table, the so-called Shanghai Ranking. Additional agreements were also made for specific areas, such as for example translation and cultural heritage (MoC RS, 2024). After the start of the BRI, the agreement on the mutual establishment of cultural centers was signed in 2015 (Ibid.), and they were opened in the next few years in Beijing and Belgrade.

During this period, individual initiatives continued, but they were mostly channeled toward official cultural cooperation, linked to and organized through states, i.e., bilateral state relations. For example, in 2014, China was the guest of honor at the annual Belgrade International Book Fair, after which publishers were encouraged to apply for Chinese state grants to translate works of literature, as well as a curated selection of books on modern Chinese society, politics, etc. This led to a great number of new publications, including several special series focused exclusively on contemporary China, many of which were, however, again translated via third-language sources to facilitate the speed of publishing. Another example is the Chinese Festival of Light, which has been organized in Belgrade and Novi Sad since 2019 at the start of the Lunar New Year. The idea came from Slobodan Trkulja, a Serbian artist specializing in traditional Balkan music, which is popular in China, but he established the festival with the support of the Serbian government and the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The festival soon became an important symbol of bilateral friendly relations, with regular celebrations to mark the start of the Lunar, i.e., Chinese, New Year. Finally, elements of Chinese culture that have long been present in Serbian society also became part of the state-to-state relations. For example, traditional Chinese medicine has been practiced for decades, but in 2022, the Serbian-Chinese Association of Traditional Chinese Medicine was founded with the mutual support of the two states.

7. Conclusion

The cultural exchange between China and Serbia, governed by the two states, is still being developed, with the First China-Serbia Culture Communication Forum being held only in April 2024, prompted by the then-upcoming visit of the Chinese president to Belgrade. There has been little research in this domain, but some studies note areas for improvement, for example, better coordination and upgrading of older materials in the case of the promotion of Chinese culture in Serbia (Li, 2018). China has also been adapting its approach to cultural diplomacy – the effectiveness of Confucius Institutes was questioned (e.g. Hubbert, 2019), and at the same time, more Cultural Centers were established even in countries that had a Confucius Institute, like Serbia. Simultaneously, the contemporary interactions and ties presented in this study reflect an interest in strengthening the perception of a historical connection and “Ironclad Friendship” between Serbia and China, even though the comparative historical overview shows that cultural exchanges have intensified only after the start of the BRI and especially in recent years.

Regardless of its relation to material realities, the narrative of the “Ironclad Friendship” seems to be a productive framework for facilitating cooperation and strengthening mutual goodwill and public support, and thus, cultural ties are a key factor to monitor and study in the future. Cultural ties are a known diplomatic tool, but so is their perception, i.e., narratives used to legitimize and deepen contemporary cooperation. The long-term value of these tools depends on whether they lead to an increase in actual cultural closeness and, perhaps more importantly, produce tangible and sustainable socio-economic benefits for both countries.

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Јелена Гледић
Универзитет у Београду
Филолошки факултет
Катедра за оријенталистику

КУЛТУРНЕ ВЕЗЕ КИНЕ И СРБИЈЕ: ИСТОРИЈСКИ ПРЕГЛЕД

Резиме

Општа историја кинеско-југословенских односа добро је истражена, а у последње време дошло је и до појаве великог броја студија о сарадњи између Народне Републике Кине и Републике Србије које се фокусирају на 21. век, посебно на економске односе и геополитичке импликације у контексту положаја Србије у Европи. Међутим, културна сарадња између ове две земље је и даље недовољно истражена: постоји свега неколико студија које настоје да систематски анализирају историју културних веза, ван контекста међународних односа. Овај рад пружа свеобухватни компаративни преглед историје кинеско-српских културних веза и разматра њихов значај за билатералне односе и сарадњу. Србија је данас један од најближих партнера Кине у Европи, а појавио се и наратив о такозваном „Челичном пријатељству“ између две земље који недвосмислено смешта политичку и социо-економску сарадњу у културолошки контекст. То чини истраживање културних веза између Кине и Србије важним не само за хуманистичке и друштвене науке, већ и за практичну сферу спољне политике и геополитике.

Ова студија има за циљ да допринесе разумевању улоге културе у међународним односима. Примарни извори на српском и кинеском језику (билатерални споразуми, документи о културној политици итд.) и секундарна литература су анализирани квалитативно и компаративно како би се мапирале кинеско-српске културне везе од првих контаката до данашњих дана. Анализа посебно истиче промене током времена и везе између политичких и социо-економских односа и културне сарадње. Рад најпре представља ране неформалне контакте, затим сарадњу док је Србија била део Југославије, са посебним одељком о културним контактима појединача и заједница, и на крају развој у последњих неколико деценија у оквиру новог проактивног приступа спољној политици који практикује Кина.

Савремене интеракције и везе представљене у овој студији одражавају напоре да се оснажи перцепција историјске повезаности и „Челичног пријатељства“ између Србије и Кине, иако компаративни историјски преглед показује да су културне размене интензивирани тек након покретања кинеске глобалне Иницијативе појас и пут, а посебно у последњих неколико година. Ипак, без обзира на његову историјску утемељеност, чини се да је наратив о „Челичном пријатељству“ продуктиван оквир за сарадњу и јачање јавне подршке. Стога су културне везе кључни фактор који треба пратити и проучавати у будућности. Културне везе су познат дипломатски алат, али је значајна и њихова перцепција, тј. наративи који се користе за легитимисање и продубљивање савремене сарадње. Дугорочна вредност ових алата зависи од тога да ли доводе до стварног повећања културне блискости и, можда још важније, да ли доводе до опипљивих и одрживих позитивних социо-економских резултата за обе земље.

► *Кључне речи:* Кина, Србија, културне везе, међународни односи, Челично пријатељство.