REPORT ON THE MASTER THESIS

IEPS – International Economic and Political Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University

Title of the thesis:	Trump administration's Foreign Policy toward China
Author of the thesis:	Ai Xuena
Referee *(incl. titles)*:	Dr Janusz Salamon

Comments of the referee on the thesis highlights and shortcomings (following the 5 numbered aspects of your assessment indicated below).

1) Theoretical background: There are good reasons one might expect Ai Xuena's project to be both difficult and easy. The topic might be considered easy, because there are few issues in the international relations that would be given more attention by scholars over the last decade than the US-Sino relations. So there is a lot of relevant material, penned by scholars of IR and by leading practitioners of diplomacy, starting with H. Kissinger. But the thesis does not concern US-Sino relations in general, but the China policy of the Trump administration. Formulated this way, the topic is difficult due largely to the messy foreign policy of the Trump's administration bordering on the lack of any genuine strategy (other than a vaguely isolationist and hardline approach to foreign policy in general). The improvisatory, personalizes and ad hoc style of Trump's conduct on the international stage creates a fundamental problem for a researcher like Ai Xuena, since it raised the question: what should one analyse in the first place, when one wants to analyse Trump's administration foreign policy? Documents issues by the US State Department, which Trump probably never read? Trump's policy speeches on the subject which he did read, but did not follow through? Or should one analyse the trajectory of the US foreign policy towards China over the last 3 years? But is there a clear trajectory to be detected? Surely, one does not want to turn a thesis on the US-Sino relations into a psychological investigation into President Trump's personality as the main explanatory factor in 'Trump's foreign policy'. Ai Xuena settles for a methodologically easier interpretation of her task, which limits her achievement. Firstly, she puts the discussion of the issue indicated in the title in the broader historical perspective of the development of the US-Sino relations (thus limiting the space devoted to the current US' China policy). Secondly, she limits the space devoted to Trump's China policy further by ignoring the fact, that the title of her work indicates that the thesis will not be a symmetrical analysis of both superpower's attitudes to each. It is not fully symmetrical, but a lot of space is devoted to China's policy towards the US. Thirdly, Ai focuses on the official pronouncements of the US State Department (including Trump's speeches the content of which has been provided by the State Department), rather than on the actual messy developments on the ground over the last 3 years (surely, the analysis of the two 'sources' of information about the US China policy would require different methodological approach). Since the subject matter of the thesis is at the end not very sharply defined, the theoretical framework is also vague. Last but not least, it seems to me that over the entire thesis hangs the shadow of its 'original sin' in the form of the confusion between the descriptive and normative approach to the issue at hand. At the very beginning of her thesis, Ai states: "My thesis will focus on the following general research question: Why does Trump's government need to adjust its policy toward China and how China and the United States avoid conflict?" This "research question?", as Ai calls it, carries with it powerful normative overtones and promises to push the entire discussion in the philosophical direction, which would require a framework in a form of some particular theory of international relations favoured by the Author, against the background of which the said „conflict" and its undesirability would be defined, etc. Such issues cannot be dealt at merely descriptive level, by reporting the facts about the development of the US-Sino relations since the inauguration of Trump's administration and by reporting the declared intentions of the parties involved.

2) Contribution: Against that background, Ai Xuena's contribution appears to lie in bringing to light the contrast between style of the US foreign policy towards China that may be discern (not without difficulties) in the last 3 years and the China policy of Obama's or G. W. Bush. On the other hand, Ai's work is future-

oriented. She is keen to indicate how she would like the US China policy to develop in the future. The thesis is weaker as an attempt to clarify the Trump administration's foreign policy.

3) Methods: Ai Xuena states openly that she chose to apply two methods: 'document analysis' and 'historical research'. Surely, more methodological tools available to scholars of international relations might be used, given that the main focus of the thesis is not supposed to be a history of the US-Sino relations or their future desirable development, but the current China policy of the Trump administration.

4) Literature: Bibliography is a mixed bag in this case, because Ai apparently made an effort to take into account many works that may shed light on the subject matter of her thesis. But a more theory-conscious approach to the issue at hand, would require additional material.

5) Manuscript form: The work bears signs of significant effort to make the work stylistically acceptable, and the overall structure is orderly, with footnotes and bibliography acceptable.

Box for the thesis supervisor only. *Please characterize the progress in the working out of thesis (e.g. steady and gradual versus discontinuous and abrupt) and the level (intensity) of communication/cooperation with the author*:
Discontinuous; intensified at the last stage of cooperation.

Sugested questions for the defence are:
1) Given the famously impulsive and improvisatory style of Donald Trump's conduct on the international stage, how do understand the relation between the policy documents of the US State Department and Trump's foreign policy? Do you think one should simply ignorne Donald Trump, while analysing „foreign policy of the Trump Administration towards China"?
2) How would you reply to a Trump's supporter who would say that the US „paid" for the rise of China a high price and the basic intuitions voiced by Donald Trump (perhaps in less than over-sophisticated way) are right?

I recommend the thesis for final defence. I recommend the following grade: **"C"**.

SUMMARY OF POINTS AWARDED (for details, see below):

CATEGORY	POINTS
Theoretical background (max. 20)	12
Contribution (max. 20)	14
Methods (max. 20)	11
Literature (max. 20)	17
Manuscript form (max. 20)	17
TOTAL POINTS *(max. 100)*	**71**
The proposed grade (A-B-C-D-E-F)	**C**

DATE OF EVALUATION: 10.6.2020

Janusz Salamon

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Referee Signature

Overall grading scheme at FSV UK:

TOTAL POINTS	GRADE	Level of performance
91 – 100	**A**	= outstanding (high honour)
81 – 90	**B**	= superior (honour)
71 – 80	**C**	= good
61 – 70	**D**	= satisfactory
51 – 60	**E**	= low pass
50 – 0	**F**	= failure. Thesis is then not recommended for defence.