

# HUNGARIANS IN CHINA – THE PIONEERS OF HUNGARIAN-CHINESE RELATIONS

Gergely Salát<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Intergovernmental Relations Before 1949

For a long time, there was no direct contact between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Chinese Empire. However, after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, intergovernmental relations were established. Between 1868 and 1870, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy sent an expedition to East Asia, which included the great traveler János Xántus, and this delegation also reached China. On September 2, 1869, the expedition signed a trade and navigation agreement with China in Beijing. This can be considered the first Hungarian-Chinese treaty, though it was not signed by Hungary alone, but by the Monarchy. Following the conclusion of the 1869 treaty, the Monarchy opened a consulate in Shanghai, China's most international city, where the country had the most intense contact with the outside world. Much later, in 1897, an Austro-Hungarian embassy was opened in the capital, Beijing. However, China only sent its first diplomatic representative to Vienna in 1902, until which time the Chinese envoy in St. Petersburg fulfilled this role, indicating the Qing Dynasty's limited interest in the Monarchy.

An important and not very glorious event of this period was that when the Boxer Rebellion broke out in 1900, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy joined the

Eight-Nation Alliance that suppressed the uprising. Since the Qing Dynasty declared war on the invading great powers, the Monarchy was briefly at war with China. The participation of Austria-Hungary was quite controversial in Hungary, as many did not see the point of Hungary expanding on a distant continent. The thoughts of the skeptics were expressed by Endre Ady in his satirical poem "To China!" of which the first stanza is quoted here (of course, he was not mocking the Chinese, whom he called "Kinézers" in the poem, but the Hungarian elite of the time):

*Regarding the land of the Kinézers,  
The song once again rings,  
In the land of the Kinézers,  
The quota is immense.  
German, English, Russian, and Italian,  
Claiming land in turn,  
It would be dreadful if in China,  
There were no Hungarians!  
But there will be! "To China!"  
This is the slogan ringing,  
The Chinese claimants  
Are awaited by warships,  
The path is already marked,  
Beautifully by Jenő Zichy,  
Up, compatriots, to China,  
Claim it eagerly!*

The poet's words, however, had little influence on Austro-Hungarian decision-makers. Troops arriving with the cruiser SMS Zenta and a few other ships landed near Tianjin and marched into Beijing. A few dozen Hungarian soldiers participated in the action. The events were detailed in the doctoral dissertation of Sándor Józsa, which was published as a book titled "China and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy" in 1966, as one of the volumes in the renowned Kőrösi Csoma Small Library series. After the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, the Monarchy's presence in China, as one of the victors, grew stronger. This was most notably seen in the acquisition of a concession area in the city

<sup>1</sup> PhD, habilitated associate professor, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Head of the Chinese Department.

of Tianjin. While commonly referred to as a “colony” in Hungarian, it was not actually a colony; the small area of 108 hectares legally remained under Chinese sovereignty, with the Monarchy only taking over its administration. In Tianjin today, a few Austrian-Hungarian buildings from that time, as well as some modern replicas, preserve the memory of the concession. However, in Budapest, we can also encounter physical reminders of the 1900 intervention: on the promenade in front of the Military History Institute and Museum in Buda Castle, a row of cannons stands, among which the careful observer can find two directly in front of the main entrance, with Manchu and Chinese inscriptions cast into their bronze bodies. These two cannons, cast in 1689 and already considered museum relics in 1900, were actually captured by the Germans during the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, brought back home, and gifted by German Emperor Wilhelm II to Emperor Franz Joseph. They eventually ended up in Buda. In addition to the opening of the Tianjin concession area, it was also significant that the Monarchy opened consulates in Tianjin and Zhifu in Shandong Province (which was an independent city at the time but is now part of Yantai).

The First World War brought an end to the not-so-intense Chinese-Hungarian relations. China joined the Entente, thus aligning itself with the alliance system opposing the Monarchy. In 1917, China declared war on the Monarchy, severing diplomatic relations for a long time, invalidating previous treaties, including the first treaty of 1869. On August 14, 1917, the Chinese unilaterally terminated the Austro-Hungarian concession and took possession of the area. Finally, Austria renounced its claims in the Saint-Germain peace treaty of 1919, and Hungarian claims to the area were extinguished in 1920 with the Treaty of Trianon.

After the Chinese declaration of war, diplomatic relations were not restored for a long time. Direct contact nearly ceased between the two World Wars, and a peace treaty was only signed in 1926. Hungary’s representation in China was handled by the Netherlands, with the Dutch consulate in Shanghai taking care of the affairs of Hungarians living in China. The relevant documents were later handed over by the Dutch to the Hungarian National Archives, where the fascinating history of the Hungarian colony in Shanghai between the World Wars can be researched today.

## 2. The Other Side – The First Chinese in Hungary and the Chinese Perception of Hungary

In examining this era, it is also worth looking at the other side, namely, how the Chinese appeared in Hungary. To our knowledge, the first Chinese only arrived in Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century. As mentioned, China established a representation in Vienna in 1902. In the early 1900s, the Qing Empire, in its final hours, made one last desperate attempt to modernize itself, which required actively studying the institutions, economies, and technologies of more developed countries, as the Japanese had done a few decades earlier. The Chinese were much less determined and successful in this endeavor, but the first visits by Chinese to Hungary were linked to these study tours. In 1906, a high-ranking Chinese delegation led by a Manchu prince visited the Monarchy, and among other things, the guests visited the Weiss Manfréd ammunition factory in Csepel. In 1910, another prince studied Hungary’s military industries. Between 1912 and 1916, the two countries signed seven loan agreements. These contacts had little impact on either China or Hungary.

In addition to official delegations, it is worth mentioning a famous Chinese figure who visited Hungary. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), the most famous Chinese reform intellectual of the time—who at that time could hardly return home as Empress Dowager Cixi would likely have executed him, as she did with his comrades after the Hundred Days’ Reform—visited Hungary during his Western tours in 1904 and again in 1908. Having quoted Ady’s poem with a Chinese connection earlier, it is fitting to also include here the poem Kang Youwei wrote about the Hungarians:

*“White skin, rosy cheeks—  
Yet the race is known by heart:  
They greet me warmly, shaking hands,  
All the Hungarians, big and small.  
A rare traveller in Hungary,  
Never seen before, my home is far—  
I am the first to walk this path  
From the distant land of China.”*

(Quoted by Endre Galla)

It is noteworthy that in early 20th-century China—where the concepts of today’s political correctness were, of course, unknown—theories about the “white race” and the “yellow race” were fashionable. These theories also touched upon Hungary. Many Chinese intellectuals had heard of the Asian origins of the Hungarians, and the Chinese, seeking potential allies in the developed world, concluded from this that the Hungarians had special connections with the Chinese. This is reflected in Kang Youwei’s poem above, but even more clearly in one of the first Chinese science fiction works, *New Era*. The novel, published in 1908, is the work of a certain Biheguan Zhuren (likely a pseudonym, possibly hiding none other than the most prominent figure of contemporary political and cultural movements, Liang Qichao), and is set in 1999–2000, the distant future at the time. The plot of the story, which is currently being translated into Hungarian, begins with Hungary, populated two-thirds by “yellow” and one-third by “white” people, wishing to join the Chinese sphere of influence (by adopting the Chinese calendar), but the white nations attempt to prevent this through military pressure. To maintain its authority, China—leading the alliance of yellow nations—sends a fleet to defend Hungary. The book details how the Chinese and Western fleets deploy increasingly advanced technologies to defeat each other. For our purposes, the important point is that, at least in the eyes of some Chinese intellectuals, Hungary held a special place in the world.

While a small Austrian-Hungarian quarter formed in Tianjin—where Hungarians also lived—a whole Chinese colony was established in Budapest. The now almost forgotten community arrived sometime in the early 20th century and settled primarily on Conti (now Tolnai Lajos), Szövetség, and Huszár streets. They mainly traded in decorative items made of soapstone and rice paper, and their numbers were not large: a 1914 survey estimated their number at 62. The notable Hungarian writer Ferenc Molnár, author of *The Paul Street Boys*, wrote about them in his 1914 article titled *The Chinese*:

“A poor ‘little statue seller’ tried to cross from one side of the street to the other when an automobile came and ran him over without a word. He died. I couldn’t even determine his name from the newspapers. Some said it was Liuigi, others said Liu-ki-ki Typhees, or Tyu-igi, but the majority simply called him Luigi, because that’s at least a nice and meaningful Italian name, meaning Lajos. This

poor Lajos was one of those strange figures who suddenly appeared in Pest and caused a sensation by being real dirty Chinese and selling little statues and wild animals carved out of soapstone. Then we got used to them, and now they are part of the life of the street and the café, but I still don’t know how they make a living. Just as no one has ever seen a donkey die, I have never seen anyone buy anything from them. [...] The mystery of how these people got here is more or less solved. At first, it was thought that some Czech manufacturer had brought them from China—because they are Chinese—to peddle Chinese handicrafts made in Bohemia. But then we learned that this was not the case. They themselves carve these little colourful wild dogs, wild idols, and wild inkwells from soft stone with hard knives. In recent years, an emigration fever beyond all imagination has gripped the miserable Chinese population. [...] These wandering sculptors of Pest are the furthest outposts of this vast wave emanating from China; they have travelled the farthest because they didn’t come here from the East, but from the West, having circled around most of the globe. You can imagine how bad things are at home if they travel so far for the prosperity they find here.”

In reality, the Chinese in Budapest arrived via the Trans-Siberian Railway, which led to suspicions during the outbreak of World War I that they were spying for the Russians. An investigation was launched against them, but it had no consequences. Their numbers likely dwindled after the severance of relations between China and the Monarchy. In 1920, nine Chinese were living in the country, and by 1925 the number had grown to around fifty, but they probably left Budapest for good during the Great Depression. Their story has not yet been scientifically explored, but research is currently underway for a doctoral dissertation that will focus on the history of the earliest Chinese colony in Hungary.

### 3. Hungarian Travelers in China

When discussing the historical context of Hungarian-Chinese relations, it is important to highlight a unique phenomenon: the journeys of Hungarian orientalist and other scholars to China. These trips significantly contributed to the formation of Hungary’s image of China, which also influenced post-1949

relations. To fully understand this, we must look back in time, well before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Hungarians have shown a keen interest in China, likely influenced by theories concerning Hungary's eastern origins. However, this interest was largely one-sided for a long time, reflecting an asymmetry in the relationship, with Hungarians being more fascinated by China than vice versa. This is evident from the fact that the first known Hungarian to visit China did so in the 14th century, while the first Chinese visitor to Hungary only arrived in the 20th century.

The first known Hungarian in China was a monk named Gregorius de Hungaria (Gregory of Hungary). During the 13th–14th centuries, the Mongol Empire spanned much of Eurasia, making it relatively easier to travel from Europe to East Asia. Diplomatic exchanges between these regions became more frequent, and Gregory reached China as part of a papal embassy sent to the Mongols. In 1341, he met the Chinese emperor as an envoy of Pope Benedict XII. The embassy, led by the Florentine Giovanni Marignoli, spent five years in the Yuan Empire before returning to Europe in 1346. Unfortunately, most of the records about this mission focus on Marignoli, leaving us with little information about Gregory beyond his name.

Another obscure figure is Blessed Matheus Escandel, who traveled to the interior of China during the Ming Dynasty, shortly after Gregory. Born in Buda and either a Pauline or Dominican friar, Matheus supposedly traveled to India and then China through the Holy Land. He is said to have been martyred around 1399. Legend has it that he resurrected five people who had been killed in a theological dispute, for which he was subsequently executed by local priests, making him the first Chinese martyr recognized by the Roman Catholic Church.

Another notable Hungarian traveller was the Jesuit Johann Grueber (1623–1680), born in Linz. He arrived in Macau in 1658 and worked in Beijing for several years alongside the famous German Jesuit Johann Adam Schall von Bell. Upon returning to Europe, Grueber served as a priest in various Hungarian towns, including Sárospatak, Tokaj, and Győr.

Among scholarly Jesuits, it is worth mentioning János Molnár (1728–1804), who, although he never visited China, wrote a book on Chinese architecture based on the descriptions of his fellow Jesuits who lived there. He also introduced the Confucian canon to Hungarian readers through his periodical, *Magyar Könyv-ház*.

Interest in China among Hungarian clergy did not wane in later centuries. Ignác Erdélyi, a Lazarist missionary, lived in China from 1861, and another Lazarist, Ignác Ürge, followed around 1880. Hungarian missionary activity became more organized in the 1920s, with the Jesuits, Franciscans, and Kalocsa School Sisters establishing their own missions in China. These missions continued until 1949.

From the 18th century onwards, secular Hungarian travellers also ventured into China. One of the earliest was András Jelky (1738–1783), a tailor who reportedly travelled to Macau and Canton, though reliable information about his activities there is scarce. Another figure from this era is the adventurer Mórícz Benyovszky (1741–1786), who, after escaping from a Russian prisoner-of-war camp in Kamchatka, spent several weeks in Taiwan. Benyovszky believed that the island was entirely controlled by indigenous peoples and wrote a proposal to the French king on how to colonize it.

The 19th century was a golden age for Hungarian scholarly travellers. Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (1784–1842) set out from Nagyenyed to find the original homeland of the Hungarians. After a long journey, he reached Tibet, where he spent several years in various monasteries during the 1820s. Although he did not find the ancestors of the Hungarians, his Tibetan dictionary, grammar, and other works earned him recognition as the founder of Tibetan studies.

Count Manó Andrássy (1821–1891), later Prime Minister and brother of Count Gyula Andrássy, travelled through Southeast Asia as an émigré after the 1848–49 Hungarian War of Independence. In 1849, he visited Hong Kong, Macau, and Canton. His experiences in China and India were documented in his illustrated book, *Travel in the East Indies*, which earned him membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

Another significant traveller was János Xántus (1825–1894), a naturalist and ethnographer who emigrated to America after the revolution and returned to Hungary with a vast collection of natural history specimens. Xántus was part

of the 1868 Austro-Hungarian Asian expedition, which visited Ceylon, Siam, Japan, and China, where he gathered valuable materials.

The most important Hungarian expedition of the era was led by Count Béla Széchenyi (1837–1908), son of the “Greatest Hungarian.” Between 1877 and 1880, Széchenyi, along with the renowned geographer Lajos Lóczy (1849–1920) and Austrian cartographer Gustav Kreitner (1847–1893), explored large parts of China and other East and Southeast Asian regions. Their work, detailed in a three-volume report, was groundbreaking for its time. Lóczy’s book, *Description of the Natural Conditions and Countries of the Chinese Empire*, provided an outstanding description of China’s geography. The scientific data, rock samples, and fossil collections from this expedition were analyzed by numerous scholars, and their writings on China remained significant for decades.

Inspired by Lajos Lóczy, Jenő Cholnoky (1870–1950) traveled to China in 1896, spending two years in the country. He studied the deltas of China’s major rivers, discovered a large lava field in Manchuria, and collected valuable ethnographic materials. His adventures were recounted in his popular book *From the Land of Dragons – Vignettes and Travelogues from China*.

The most internationally renowned Hungarian scholar-traveler was Aurel Stein (1862–1943), who explored Inner Asia, including Chinese territories. He became famous for introducing the Dunhuang manuscripts to the world. These manuscripts, found along the ancient Silk Road in the Buddhist cave temples near Dunhuang, were crucial in understanding medieval Chinese and Inner Asian Buddhist art and culture. Stein’s discoveries were so significant that today, an international project is attempting to digitally reunite the scattered manuscripts online. Hungarian scholar Imre Galambos, currently a professor at Cambridge University, has been involved in this project.

Another noteworthy expedition was that of Count Jenő Zichy in 1898. Zichy aimed to search for alleged Árpád-era documents in the imperial archives of Beijing, which were supposedly looted by Batu Khan from Hungary. However, he arrived during the coup that ended the “Hundred Days’ Reform,” preventing him from accessing the archives. Later, it became clear that no Hungarian materials were present there. Before Zichy, his brothers József and Ágost had visited China during their 1875–1876 tour of the continent, but their journey

was more of a tourist venture than a scientific expedition. Nevertheless, József’s recently discovered and published diary provides a highly readable account of China during that era.

Ferenc Hopp (1833–1919), though not a scholar, left his mark on Hungarian oriental studies. A successful optician who traveled to China multiple times, Hopp acquired valuable art pieces that he later bequeathed to the Hungarian state along with his villa. These formed the foundation of the Hopp Ferenc Museum of East Asian Art. His artistic advisor and the museum’s first director, Zoltán Felvinczi Takács (1880–1964), continued to expand, organize, and research the collection of East Asian art in Hungary until his death.

The last of the “scholar-travellers” was Lajos Ligeti, who spent three years in Inner Mongolia from 1928, studying classical Mongolian writings and conducting linguistic research. As the founder of Hungary’s oriental studies institutions, Ligeti’s influence is still felt today in the field’s academic infrastructure, research directions, and educational programs.

From the 19th century, other Hungarians also reached China in various capacities. Ödön Faragó lived in China from 1873 as a customs official, writing extensively about the country and proposing a theory of Chinese-Hungarian linguistic kinship. Engineers Károly Gubányi (1867–1935) and Antal Szentgáli (1868–1945), disciples of Lóczy, worked in Manchuria on various construction projects from 1896 to 1904. Naval officer Jób Kompolthy lived in China for a decade starting in 1902 and is credited with organizing postal services in the Yangtze River provinces.

Between the two World Wars, the already mentioned Hungarian colony in Shanghai grew significantly in size. After the end of World War I, many Hungarian prisoners of war, who had been held in Russian captivity, stopped in Shanghai on their way home—or settled there permanently—many of them achieving considerable success. Later, Hungarian Jews also sought refuge there. Both the Hungarian POWs and the Jewish refugees were greatly aided by Pál Komor (1886–1973), known as the “Wallenberg of Shanghai,” who had originally arrived there through his family’s art business and essentially grew up in the city. Another notable resident of Shanghai was László Hugyecz (or Hudec) (1893–1958), an architect born in Besztercebánya. He arrived in China

in 1920, founded his own firm in 1925, and designed a total of 65 buildings in the international metropolis. His works, including the famous Park Hotel, significantly contributed to the development of Shanghai's modern skyline. Another well-known architect in Shanghai was Károly Gonda (1889–1969), born in Gyöngyös, who worked in the city around the same time as Hugyecz, leaving behind nine recognized public buildings. The life of the Hungarian community in Shanghai was also enriched by colourful personalities like the adventurer Ignác Trebitsch, immortalized as the real Trebitsch, also known as „Buzgó Mócsing”, in the novels of Jenő Rejtő.

#### 4. The First Generation of Hungarian Sinologists

A few years after World War II, the local communist parties came to power in both Hungary and China, aligning the two countries politically within the same bloc. There was no doubt that the Hungarian People's Republic would recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), and the two newly established states quickly established diplomatic relations, doing so just a few days after the PRC was proclaimed in early October 1949. This marked the beginning of a completely new chapter in the history of Hungarian-Chinese relations.

The first Hungarian envoy accredited to China, Emánuel Safrankó, presented his credentials on February 15, 1950, while the first Chinese envoy to Budapest, Huang Zhen, did so on August 4, 1950. The foundation for bilateral relations was soon laid with agreements signed during this period, marking the first equal treaties between the two countries. Over the following years, numerous agreements were signed covering trade, cultural cooperation, telecommunications, plant protection, and more. After the 1956 revolution in Hungary, China's economic and political support played a crucial role in the consolidation of the Kádár government. The importance of this relationship was underscored by Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Budapest in January 1957 and János Kádár's visit to China in September–October of the same year. The relationship peaked in April–May 1959 when Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Münnich signed the Hungarian-Chinese Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in China, and that same year, President István Dobi attended the celebrations in Beijing marking the 10th anniversary of the PRC's establishment.

The increasing complexity and institutionalization of these relations meant that bilateral exchanges between the two countries intensified across various sectors, with regular visits from leaders, professional delegations, artistic ensembles, and sports and scientific delegations from both sides. The backbone of these relations was no longer the visit of a single outstanding figure but rather the cooperation between institutions. In just a few decades, the distance between the two countries had shrunk significantly. Before the advent of steamships, the journey to China could take years, and even in the second half of the 19th century, it took months. With the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the travel time was reduced to weeks, but for a long time, even air travel took several days due to layovers. Today, direct flights can take you from Budapest to a major Chinese city in just a few hours. This increase in connectivity was mirrored by the intensification of relations, with hundreds of delegations and companies travelling between the two countries annually, staying for just days or weeks rather than months or years.

Given the breadth and depth of these exchanges over the past 75 years, it is hardly meaningful to highlight a single individual. However, there is one group that deserves special attention: the Hungarian sinologists who laid the foundation for this field of study in Hungary and were the first to pursue advanced studies in China. Their impact on the relationship between the two countries is immeasurable, as they made the new China accessible to the Hungarian public and decision-makers through their translations and writings. Initially, they even served as interpreters, facilitating direct communication between the leaders of the two nations. Due to their exceptional importance and the fact that they devoted their lives to understanding and introducing China, we will focus on them in the following sections—without diminishing the significance of many other figures. We also need to concentrate on a select group because it would be impossible to include everyone who has played or continues to play a vital role in the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations in this article.

The establishment of Hungarian sinology was made possible by the fact that in the early 1950s, not only did political and economic cooperation begin, but cultural, educational, and scientific exchanges as well. The political leadership recognized that good political and economic relations required specialists—interpreters, translators, diplomats—who could serve as intermediaries

between the two nations and a foundation of cultural knowledge on which other forms of cooperation could be built. As a result, the systematic training of Hungarian China researchers began, with the Chinese program at the university in Budapest, renamed Eötvös Loránd University, being reorganized and modernized. In 1950, the first group of Hungarian scholarship students traveled to China, followed by subsequent cohorts in later years. Among those who went to China were Endre Galla (1926–2008), Vilma Mészáros (1921–1977), Sándor Józsa (1928–), Pál Miklós (1927–2002), Barna Tálás (1928–2019), Péter Polonyi (1935–2011), and Éva Kalmár (1938–). They were the ones who essentially established and caused the flourishing of sinology in Hungary, alongside some excellent experts trained at home, notably Ferenc Tőkei (1930–2000) and Barnabás Csongor (1923–2018). At the same time, Chinese students were also sent to Hungary, contributing to the understanding of Hungary in China.

Below, we will introduce them in order of their years of birth.

Barnabás Csongor, born in Miskolc, due to his age, began working with China earlier than the others and was already an established China researcher when relations blossomed after 1949. He graduated from high school in Beregszász in 1941, studied Hungarian and Italian at the predecessor of ELTE from 1942, and began studying Chinese there as well. In 1947, he defended his doctorate on the topic of Uyghur-script Chinese fragments. His literary background gave him a unique cultural and stylistic sensitivity, making him perhaps the best Chinese-Hungarian translator. From 1948 to 1949, he worked at the Hopp Ferenc Museum of Asian Art, and in June 1950, he became a research fellow at ELTE's East Asian Department, earning his candidate's degree in 1960. From 1962 until his retirement in 1990, he was an associate professor and, from 1963 to 1983, the head of the Chinese and East Asian Department. Although he never had the opportunity to study at a university in China, he made several extended research trips to the Far Eastern country. Barnabás Csongor's name is associated with the Hungarian translations of several of the greatest works of classical Chinese literature, including *Journey to the West* and *Water Margin*. He also conducted extensive linguistic and educational work. The author of these lines is convinced that no translations of Chinese novels into any Western language match the quality of those produced by Barnabás Csongor. To illustrate the

situation of this generation, it is worth quoting Csongor's reflections on his own career and the early days of Hungarian sinology:

"I simply decided to become an Orientalist, although I had no idea what that was—I just knew it was something wonderful and extraordinary. Of course, my parents were distraught, telling me, 'Son, you'll starve to death, like Sándor Csoma.' Of course, Sándor Csoma died differently, but he died nonetheless, so it's not good to be an Orientalist. [...]"

Everyone had to choose two teaching subjects, and if someone had time and energy, they could study something else, like Eastern languages. I got into the Hungarian-Italian program, but during the entrance exam, I met my future professor, Lajos Ligeti. When I told him I wanted to be an Orientalist, instead of embracing me warmly into the circle of Eastern scholars as I secretly hoped, he growled, 'What?! Do you know German? English? French? Russian? Chinese? Mongolian? Now listen here: you have to learn all of this. And once you've learned it all, you can become a hotel porter, because that's not yet science. Science comes after that. And once you've mastered that, you'll starve to death because there's no job. Do you still want to be an Orientalist?' 'Yes,' I said, feeling cornered. 'And what do you want to study?' 'Japan.' 'Japan, my boy, doesn't exist. Either it's China, or you go to hell.' That's how I became a China scholar. [...]"

When I got my diploma and was appointed as an assistant lecturer, Ligeti handed over the entire burden of the department to me. So, I had to teach Chinese language classes, various classical courses, and present basic knowledge, such as Chinese history, Chinese grammar, and literary history. So, I had to learn these subjects as well. This is when the incredible richness, depth, and breadth of Chinese culture began to unfold before me, and it has captivated me ever since. [...]"

In 1949, we established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, and the books and materials available to us began to increase. For example, in 1949, there was the World Youth Festival in Budapest, and after much effort, Ferenc Tőkei, who was my student at the time and later my colleague and teacher, and I managed to locate the Chinese delegation. We stammered out the two sentences we had managed to learn in modern Chinese from a book.

They were very pleased with us and gifted us with half a crate of brochures, works by Mao Zedong, and issues of Renmin Ribao, so from then on, we had live Chinese texts to read.”

Ferenc Tókei, mentioned by Csongor, was also a student at the Faculty of Humanities at ELTE, majoring in Chinese and Tibetan studies. He belonged to a generation that acquired their foundational knowledge at home, as they had no opportunity to study in China. Alongside his sinological studies, he engaged in philosophy, and he was recognized as both an outstanding sinologist and philosopher. He earned his degree in 1953, became a candidate of linguistic sciences in 1956, and received his doctorate in literary studies in 1965. During the 1950s, he worked at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts and later became an editor at Europa Publishing House, where he initiated the publication of Chinese and other Eastern books and contributed to their editing and translation. His work on the “Asiatic mode of production” gained significant international attention. From 1967, he worked at the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), serving as its director from 1969 to 1972. From 1971, he taught at ELTE’s Department of Philosophy and later at the Chinese Department. His outstanding contribution includes a three-volume collection of ancient Chinese philosophical texts, which remains essential for anyone in Hungary studying Chinese philosophy.

The fate of the generation that was of age around 1949 to be sent abroad for higher education was quite different. (Vilma Mészáros is part of this group; due to the numerus clausus, she could only attend university later, and after her Chinese scholarship, she focused more on French and world literature, contributing to sinology with only a few translations, hence she is not discussed here.) Members of this generation initially did not choose Chinese, but based on their achievements and abilities in other fields, the university and party leadership decided to send them to China.

Such was the case of Endre Galla, who studied Hungarian and German at the Faculty of Humanities of the Pázmány Péter University in Budapest between 1945 and 1950. In December 1950, he was sent to the People’s Republic of China with the first group of Hungarian students on a state scholarship. He went to Beijing, where he studied Chinese at the prestigious Tsinghua University

from 1950 to 1952, and then pursued literary studies at Peking University as a postgraduate until 1955. He was primarily interested in certain aspects of 20th-century Chinese literature and published numerous translations, conducting extensive research in the field of Hungarian-Chinese literary and cultural relations, becoming the foremost researcher on the Chinese reception of Sándor Petőfi. In the 1950s, he worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served as a diplomat, but in 1959, at his own request, he was transferred to ELTE’s Department of Chinese and East Asian Studies. He not only translated Chinese literary works into Hungarian but also translated Hungarian poetry, including works by Sándor Petőfi, János Arany, Attila József, Endre Ady, and others, into Chinese. He wrote his candidate’s dissertation on *Hungarian Literature in China*, which he defended in 1962. From 1983 to 1995, he served as the head of the East Asian Department.

Pál Miklós was a renowned researcher in Chinese art history. He graduated from Pázmány Péter University in 1950 with a degree in Hungarian and French. He then went to China on a scholarship, where he studied Chinese art history at Peking University from 1951 to 1954. From 1954, he worked as a museologist at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts, and in 1959 he became a candidate of art history. Between 1958 and 1974, he was a researcher at the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and from 1975 to 1985, he served as the director-general of the Museum of Applied Arts. From 1985 to 1987, he was the director of the Ferenc Hopp Museum. He introduced Hungarian readers to the history and interpretation of Chinese visual arts through numerous books and hundreds of studies, while also producing literary translations.

Barna Tóth became a well-known China scholar as an economist. He graduated in 1950 from ELTE with a degree in philosophy, political economy, and psychology, and like others, he was sent to China. From 1951 to 1952, he studied Chinese at Tsinghua University, and from 1952 to 1955, he was a postgraduate at the People’s University. He worked multiple times for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and served as a diplomat, as well as working at the Institute of Economics of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs, the National Planning Office, and other economic institutions. He published several books and hundreds of articles on China’s economy.

Historian Sándor Józsa also went to the newly established People's Republic of China with the first group of Hungarian students in the early 1950s. He worked in the field of Hungarian-Chinese relations throughout his life, spending a total of 12 years in Beijing, during very different historical periods, and introduced generations of students to China. He wrote a book on the relations between China and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and he translated the autobiography of the last Chinese emperor, Puyi, into Hungarian. His highly readable autobiography, *From the Railway Guardhouse to the Great Wall and then to ELTE's East Asian Department*, was published in 2020.

Péter Polonyi went to Peking University on a scholarship in 1954, where he studied Chinese language and literature, graduating in 1961. He later worked at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Asiatic Arts and the Institute of Social Sciences of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). He was an extremely versatile author, mainly interested in Chinese society and politics, but he also translated classical and modern Chinese literature and wrote books and studies on Chinese history and society. He authored a travel guide to China, and from the 1990s, he played a significant role in introducing the newly emerging Chinese community in Hungary.

Éva Kalmár began her studies in Chinese language and literature at Peking University in 1956 and graduated in 1963. She was primarily interested in classical and modern Chinese literature, and for a long time, her main research area was Chinese theatre history, although in recent decades she has turned her attention to contemporary Chinese literature. As an editor at Europa Publishing House, she oversaw the publication of Eastern literature (Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Mongolian, Korean, etc.), editing around fifty books. She taught at several institutions and was one of the Hungarian translators of the Nobel laureate Mo Yan.

In addition to those mentioned above, many other personalities could be listed. A few more students managed to go to China in the 1960s – including the author's sinologist mother, Klára Mészáros, who served as ambassador in Beijing in the 1990s, and Mária Ferenczy, who later became the director of the Ferenc Hopp Museum. However, during the low point of relations in the Cultural Revolution, educational exchange programs were suspended and only resumed

in the 1980s. Other sectoral collaborations also gained new momentum at that time, and the relationships became so intense that it would be impossible to single out any one person.

## 5. Conclusion

Although this volume was prepared to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Hungarian-Chinese relations, my study did not focus on this period. Rather, it aimed to illustrate the connections between the two countries before 1949 and the foundations on which both parties could build. It also highlighted the first Hungarians who dedicated their lives to understanding and introducing China in the new era. A similar study from the other side, focusing on Chinese individuals who visited, studied, or worked in Hungary, would also be valuable, as they too played and continue to play a role in shaping relations. Today, the relationship is so complex that no single person can grasp the entire picture, which is why it is the task of specialized fields to present the collaborations that have developed in specific areas. My study can only serve as a starting point for uncovering the history of Hungarian-Chinese relations over the past 75 years, providing a foundation for more serious scientific work and commemorating the pioneers of Hungarian-Chinese relations.