

CULTURAL LINKS – THE ROLE OF CULTURAL AND CIVIL DIPLOMACY IN HUNGARIAN-CHINESE RELATIONS

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The globalization and communication explosion of the 21st century have enriched classical diplomacy in new areas, including cultural diplomacy and civil diplomacy.

Even during the ancient Silk Road era, cultural diplomacy existed, as the trade route served as a cultural bridge between East and West. Today, the goal of cultural diplomacy is to establish connection-building bridges through cultural and educational collaborations and exchange programs based on intergovernmental agreements and work plans. The scope of cultural diplomacy is broad, encompassing the creative presentation of a country's cultural diversity through art, education, music, visual arts, literature, architecture, design, gastronomy, and more. It finds common ground between countries while playing a decisive role in shaping perceptions in the long term, enhancing a country's influence and appeal on the international stage as a form of soft power. By supporting political and economic cooperation, it can advance national interests. Cultural diplomacy is crucial because it helps bridge cultural differences, dismantle stereotypes, and foster understanding and rapprochement between distant cultures, which is essential for creating a

more predictable and stable international environment. The rise of technology and social media has further shaped international relations, making them more transparent and direct. The increased activity of international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other non-state actors has become more prominent in diplomacy.

Civil diplomacy refers to initiatives not framed by intergovernmental cultural agreements. Its actors include NGOs, civil society groups, communities, and individuals. It complements traditional state-directed diplomacy by engaging a broader audience in bilateral relations as a grassroots social initiative, finding connection points between people and institutions from a different perspective. The government has a vested interest in involving civil society and collaborating with it in shaping the country's image, making civil diplomacy increasingly important, especially in areas where traditional government measures alone are insufficient to address complex problems. It fosters mutual cooperation and dialogue between different cultures, peoples, and social groups. Civil cultural initiatives effectively support cultural, economic, and political relations between two countries. For example, cultural exchange programs or art exhibitions open doors to political dialogue and create a positive environment for fulfilling diplomatic commitments. A deeper examination of these synergies shows that cultural and educational programs often lay the foundation for long-term diplomatic relations. Numerous popular programs and exchange partnerships exist between higher education, research, and cultural institutions. In education, the Stipendium Hungaricum program is significant, offering dozens of Chinese students an outstanding opportunity to develop their Hungarian language skills through exchange programs.

1. Bilateral Cooperation in the Field of Culture

The first significant relations between Hungary and China can be traced back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During this period, ethnographer and naturalist János Xántus reached China as a member of an Austro-Hungarian Southeast Asia expedition.

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The expedition, launched under the joint Austro-Hungarian flag, marked the first time since the Compromise of 1867 that Hungary had appeared on the international stage (with Hungary covering one-third of the costs). The first treaty between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and China was concluded by this delegation: on September 2, 1869, a trade and shipping agreement was signed in Beijing, which remained in force until 1917. After this, the Empire opened a consulate general in Shanghai, and much later, in 1897, the embassy in Beijing was established. In 1917, China declared war on the Empire, leading to a long break in diplomatic relations and rendering previous agreements null and void.

Between the two World Wars, the Netherlands represented Hungary in China. During this period, a significant number of Hungarians lived in China, including many who had escaped Russian captivity, and during World War II, Hungarian Jews also fled to Shanghai, a city considered an open port.

In 1949, Hungary was among the first to recognize the People's Republic of China and establish diplomatic relations, which have been continuous since then and have become particularly active since the late 1990s.

1.1. Cultural Relations (1950–1978)

The years following the establishment of diplomatic relations until the late 1960s were characterized by active cultural and artistic exchanges, including film festivals, exhibitions, concerts, and literary translations, alongside political and economic cooperation. In 1950, scholarship exchange programs were initiated, which were of paramount importance to the leadership of both countries. These programs were essential for training professionals who spoke the language and were well-versed in the customs and culture of the other country, thereby becoming active participants and future shapers of bilateral relations. These bilateral student exchange programs continue to be significant today.

Hungarian-Chinese cultural relations have traditionally been strong. One of the oldest connections is the Petőfi cult. In 1907, the first Chinese translation of Sándor Petőfi's poem *Liberty and Love* was published. Petőfi became widely

known in China thanks to Bai Mang, a poet who died young, and Lu Xun, one of the greatest figures in 20th-century Chinese literature, often referred to as the father of modern Chinese literature. China eventually became the first country in the world to translate and publish all of Petőfi's works. His entire oeuvre was published in Chinese in 1998 in six volumes, totaling more than 2,600 pages, thanks to the efforts of Xing Wansheng. Today, *Liberty and Love* is the most famous Petőfi poem and is part of the high school curriculum in China. It can be said that cultural relations have always thrived, depending on the circumstances and opportunities.

In 1951, several bilateral agreements were signed, including the first agreements on cultural cooperation, film exchanges, and radio. The 1950s saw particularly active cultural, artistic, literary, and sports relations, as well as scientific and research collaborations. During this period, Chinese language instruction at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), which had started in the 1920s, was reorganized, and according to university sources, it was associated with "Lajos Ligeti, who is referred to as the father of Hungarian sinology" (ELTE, n.d.).

From 1954–1955, a Chinese youth soccer team trained and studied in Hungary under the guidance of coach József Ember alongside the legendary *Golden Team*. The Chinese players who visited Hungary played a significant role in the development of Chinese soccer in the following decades.

During this period, cultural and educational exchanges were closely linked to political relations. However, when relations between China and the Soviet Union deteriorated in the 1960s, political-ideological tensions also arose with Hungary, which was part of the Soviet sphere of influence. As a result, "during the Cultural Revolution, Hungarian-Chinese relations hit a low point," and official cultural ties were suspended. Despite this, China managed to maintain contact with the Hungarian people through informal events organized by the embassy, such as film screenings, food tastings, and brochures, using the "go out and invite them in" strategy.

1.2. Cultural Relations After the Announcement of the Reform and Opening-up Policy

Official cultural and educational relations between Hungary and China were restored after the announcement of the reform and opening-up policy in the years following 1978. In the 1980s, cooperation in culture and sports further strengthened. In August 1982, the two countries once again sent students to each other for language training. In 1984, numerous bilateral agreements were signed between the two countries, laying a new foundation for cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, culture, radio and television, tourism, and science. Party leadership visits in 1987 further solidified these relationships. Between 1988 and 1992, visa-free travel was allowed between China and Hungary, during which time the largest Chinese community in Central Europe settled in Hungary.

In 1988, the Consulate General in Shanghai was opened, although it only operated for two years. After the political transition in Hungary, cultural, educational, sports, and other exchanges between the two countries continued to occur. In 1989, to mark the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations, China held its first Chinese Cultural Week in Hungary. Ministerial-level visits, cultural, sports, and educational cooperation agreements, and work plans became regular, providing a framework for continued cooperation. Xing Wansheng, a contemporary translator of Petőfi's works, was awarded the "Medal for Hungarian Culture" in 1991 and the Officer's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary in 1999.

According to former Hungarian Ambassador to Beijing, Sándor Kusai, despite the differences in size, national characteristics, systems, and cultures between China and Hungary, mutual respect and trust have characterized bilateral relations over the past 75 years. China has always valued Hungary's adherence to the One China principle and its non-interference in China's internal affairs. China, though a continent-sized country and the world's second-largest economy, views Hungary as a stable strategic partner based on mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation. There are no historical issues or fundamental conflicts of interest that need to be resolved. Since the political transition, every Hungarian government has maintained a consistent political stance on this issue, which has established trust in Hungary in Chinese political circles and the broader Chinese public.

2. Turning Points in Relations (2000–2010)

2.1. Political and Cultural Milestones

In 1994, Hungarian President Árpád Göncz visited China, followed by a visit from Chinese President and General Secretary Jiang Zemin to Budapest in 1995. During this period, China sought cultural cooperation, which became more active in the second half of the 1990s. Government-level agreements and state-funded collaborations provided good opportunities for cultural presentations, as did festivals organized in both countries. The framework for educational relations was established through intergovernmental agreements and work plans between ministries. A turning point in relations was marked by Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy's visit to China in 2003, the first official prime ministerial visit in 44 years. This visit is considered the beginning of the revitalization and rapid development of bilateral relations in the 21st century. Key steps signaling the advancement and expansion of relations during this period included the opening and reopening of Hungarian consulates in Hong Kong (1998–2009, then 2013), Shanghai (2004), Chongqing (2010), and Guangzhou (2021). The increase in the number of diplomatic missions not only facilitated consular tasks but also offered new platforms to strengthen economic and cultural presence and cooperation.

Hungary joined the European Union in May 2004. After accession, Hungarian-Chinese relations entered a new phase as a friendly cooperative partnership. Hungary's position as an EU Member State has great value for China. In 2006, the first Confucius Institute in Hungary was opened at ELTE University in Budapest. In 2007, the Hungarian cultural government expanded the existing cultural institution network and established an educational-cultural diplomatic network in places where Hungarian cultural institutes were not operating, as part of efforts to strengthen Hungary's cultural presence. This included two diplomatic posts in China (Beijing and Shanghai). The opening of the Shanghai consulate in 2004 marked the point at which cultural relations became even more active, with meaningful collaborations starting between 2007 and 2009, laying a solid foundation for further cultural development.

2.2. Cultural Season

The true breakthrough in Hungarian cultural presence in China came with the 2007–2008 “Liberty and Love – Focus on Hungarian Culture” cultural season. This was the first large-scale Hungarian cultural presentation in China, featuring a series of events over 12 months across 8 major Chinese cities. The season, which included cultural, tourism, gastronomic, and economic events, enhanced Hungary’s reputation and fostered long-term collaborations. Events included exhibitions, folk music, jazz and classical concerts, masterclasses, operetta performances, literary discussions, gastronomic showcases, theater and puppet shows, visual arts programs, film weeks, and translation conferences. Performers included the Győr Ballet, the Hungarian State Folk Ensemble, Experidance, the Budapest Operetta Theater, Zoltán Kocsis, Márta Sebestyén, György Vukán, Béla Szakcsi-Lakatos, Bea Palya, László Fehér, Iván Fischer, and Imre Kertész. Hungary was a guest of honor at the Shanghai International Arts Festival, and Hungarian writers and poets participated in the Shanghai International Literary Festival. Krisztina Tóth’s book *Barcode* was published in English for this occasion. In Shanghai’s Lu Xun Park, the second Chinese bust of Sándor Petőfi was unveiled. Hungary also participated in educational fairs in Beijing and Shanghai. In 2008, China was the guest of honor at the 15th Budapest International Book Festival.

2.3. Hudec in Shanghai – Nation Branding (2008–2024)

In 2008, on Hungarian Culture Day, the Hungarian Consulate General in Shanghai, in collaboration with the Shanghai Urban Planning Bureau and the Tongji University School of Architecture, announced the Hudec Year. This initiative aimed to discover and preserve the legacy of László Hudec³,

³ László Hudec, a Hungarian architect, designed buildings in a range of styles including classicism, eclecticism, expressionism, art deco, and modernism. He worked exclusively with high-quality materials and was known for his thoroughness and attention to detail, often designing the interiors of his buildings himself. Notably, he is credited with designing the city’s first air-conditioned hospital, its first brewery, and its largest theater. However, he gained fame primarily through the iconic art deco-style Park Hotel in Shanghai. Until 1984, the Park Hotel was the tallest building in Asia. Completed in 1931 and known as the Shanghai Joint Savings Society Building, this art deco building was considered a symbol of modern China. The Hungarian architect also designed an elevator, an IDD telephone line, and a subterranean vault for the 24-story Park Hotel.

a Hungarian architect who lived in Shanghai in the early 20th century. The Hudec Project was a groundbreaking, comprehensive program that created a shared cultural heritage with China, deeply valued by both peoples, and significantly contributed to shaping an innovative and tradition-rich Hungarian image in China. The project included exhibitions, books, films, city tours, heritage protection programs, and academic and international collaborations. These activities have continued to grow, and the Hungarian cultural presence in Shanghai remains active and integral. The Hudec Project is an outstanding example of building cultural bridges between countries. It provided an opportunity to discover new, clear, and immediate connections in China to Hungarian cultural icons such as Petőfi, Liszt, Kodály, and Sissi.



Image 1: Shanghai, Grand Theatre and Park Hotel (ca. 1934)

Source: hudecproject.com, Hudec Cultural Foundation

László Hudec was the only foreigner chosen among Shanghai’s 99 classic symbols in 2014. He designed more than a hundred buildings in the city, 33 of which have been designated as protected monuments. The Hungarian

Consulate General in Shanghai has received support from the city's government and foreign affairs office for the heritage and architectural project from the start. In addition to the designation of Hudec's buildings as cultural heritage sites, numerous Hungarian, Chinese, and English-language books, films, and albums have contributed to the preservation and ongoing relevance of the Hungarian architect's reputation in China. Hudec remains the most recognized Hungarian architect in Shanghai, leaving a lasting impact on the city's image. The name "Hudec" continues to be a strong Hungarian brand.

The 2008 Hudec Year provided an opportunity for Hudec's descendants to establish the Hudec Heritage Project, which organized and presented the newly discovered rich legacy in high-quality formats. In 2013, the project became official with the formation of the Hudec Cultural Foundation, a nonprofit organization actively involved in cultural and educational projects related to Hungarian architectural heritage in China. Their goal is to share the legacy and content created over the past fifteen years with a global audience.

The Hudec Year, as the first comprehensive heritage preservation cultural project in China, laid a solid foundation for continued exploration of the history of Hungarians who lived in China in the early 20th century, many of whom played significant roles in the city's development. Shanghai's iconic buildings that are now considered cultural heritage also commemorate another Hungarian architect, Károly Gonda. In November 2019, on the 70th anniversary of Hungarian-Chinese diplomatic relations, Hungary's Shanghai Consulate General and the Hungarian Association of Architects (MÉSZ) presented the album *GONDA – Shanghai's Ultramodern Hungarian Architect*. Gonda's architectural heritage in Shanghai is being restored by the East China Architectural Design & Research Institute (ECADI), one of China's most influential architectural design institutions (Baldavári, 2019). In 2022, Hungary's Shanghai Consulate General, in cooperation with the Hungarian National Archives and with support from the National Cultural Fund, published the book *We, Hungarians in Shanghai*, which fills a gap regarding Hungarians who lived in Shanghai between 1890 and 1949. During this period, nearly eight hundred Hungarians spent varying lengths of time in "Paris of the East." The

heritage and spirit of Hungarians in Shanghai continue to live on in these new projects, shaping real and enduring collaborations.⁴

With the involvement of the Hudec Cultural Foundation, an exhibition titled "Inside Out – The World of Hudec" will open in Shanghai on October 1, 2024, marking another milestone in promoting the Hungarian architect's heritage. The legacy of Hungarian architects who shaped one of the world's largest metropolises remains less known in Hungary, so it is expected that Hudec events will also be held in Hungary in 2025 as a point of connection between the two cultures.

3. Cultural Collaborations from 2010 to 2024

3.1. Eastern Opening and Educational Relations

As part of its foreign policy and economic strategy, Hungary's Eastern Opening since 2010 has placed greater emphasis on cultural collaborations. The network of institutions promoting the Chinese and Hungarian languages and cultures has expanded significantly in both countries. In Hungary, several Confucius Institutes have been established, making it possible to take the Chinese language as part of the high school leaving exam. In China, the number of universities offering Hungarian studies has increased to 13. Cultural institutes have been established in both countries, significantly aiding cultural cooperation. Today, five Confucius Institutes in Hungary support Chinese language learning and the promotion of Chinese culture (Budapest, Pécs, Szeged, Miskolc, Debrecen). The ELTE Confucius Institute, established in 2006, functions as a Chinese teacher training center for Central and Eastern Europe and ranks among the best in the world.

⁴ In 2008, the Hudec legacy was first championed in Shanghai by former Consul General Tamás Hajba, then cultural-educational diplomat Judit Éva Nagy, and photographer Attila Balogh, who lived in Shanghai. Thanks are due to all those who joined us on this extraordinary journey that has shaped the country's image and to those who documented the special Hungarian lives discovered through Hungarian architectural heritage, thereby contributing to the formation of Hungarian culture and a national image in China.

Since 2004, Hungary has had a Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual Primary School and High School, created under an agreement between the two countries' education ministries. Director Zsuzsanna Erdélyi stated that it is the only bilingual institution in Europe providing state education and Chinese language instruction. Originally intended to serve the children of Chinese families living in Hungary, it has become a significant venue for Chinese language education in Central Europe. The school also offers the possibility of taking the high school leaving exam in Chinese. Today, over five hundred students are enrolled there.

3.2. Cultural Institutions

Cultural institutions play an indispensable role in the cultural relationship between China and Hungary, including the Liszt Institute in Beijing, which opened in 2013. It promotes the Kodály Method as part of its mission. The institute is dedicated to supporting Hungarian culture in China through various activities and serves as a bridge between the two countries. According to the institute's former director, staff have traveled 298,620 km within China to promote Hungarian culture over the past 10 years. There is openness among the Chinese, and every cultural project has an audience; those interested just need to be found. Thanks to significant successful cultural diplomatic efforts, interest in Hungary has increased in China in recent years, and Hungary is no longer an unknown name.

In 2020, the Chinese Cultural Center (CCC) was established in Budapest. It has supported the presence of Chinese culture in Hungary through active online engagement and traditional and interactive events. The CCC aims to introduce Hungarian audiences to the spirit and characteristics of Chinese culture, and from 2024, its Stefánia Street building will host both traditional and innovative cultural programs.

3.3. Cultural Relations from 2014 to 2024, with Examples

The 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries was celebrated in 2014 with the “Heart of Beauty – Five Thousand Years of Chinese Masterpieces” exhibition at the Hopp Ferenc Asian Art Museum. That year also saw a concert by the Beijing Traditional Music Academy at the Liszt Academy and

a painting exhibition titled “Eternal Friends” by József Domján and Qi Baishi at the Beijing Hungarian Cultural Institute. In 2015, a unique exhibition of works by Mihály Munkácsy titled “Munkácsy Mihály and His Era: Hungarian Painting at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries” was held in Beijing. The same year, the Hungarian National Gallery hosted a retrospective exhibition of Qi Baishi, one of the greatest masters of 20th-century Chinese painting. The “Charm of Nature” collection was presented in Hungary for the first time with the collaboration of the Beijing Academy of Arts. It is important to mention that the Hopp Ferenc Asian Art Museum has a significant collection of the renowned painter's works, which first arrived in Europe in the 1930s. The Hungarian public saw his paintings for the first time at the National Salon Chinese Art Exhibition in 1938, where fifty-three of his works were exhibited.

Between 2018 and 2019, the Hungarian Consulate General in Shanghai enhanced Hungary's cultural presence with initiatives such as the 2019 stamp sheet featuring Hungarian icons such as Pál Komor, László Hudec, and Károly Gonda, and a contemporary art exhibition showcasing works by artists including Zsombor Barakonyi, Flóra Borsi, Sarolta Bán, and British photographer Marcus Goldson. In 2018, the consulate also launched the Budapest FEST, a series of events showcasing Hungarian cultural values and unique traditions, which will continue for the third time in Ningbo in 2024.

3.4. Major Civil Initiatives and Collaborations

Civil communities, individuals, patrons, and associations are increasingly playing a role in organizing and supporting cultural events and promoting Hungarian culture in China and vice versa. Here are a few examples.

3.4.1. The Role of the Chinese Community in Cultural Relations

In the context of Hungarian-Chinese relations, civil actors, including the Chinese community in Hungary, play an active role in strengthening cultural ties. They are increasingly dedicating energy to promoting Chinese culture and traditions in Hungary. A notable example was the largest-ever Chinese New Year festival in Budapest in February 2024, which attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors over two weekends.

3.4.2. Cooperation Between Cultural Institutions

The Kovács Gábor Art Foundation (KOGART) has been an active participant in bilateral collaborations, bringing many valuable exhibitions to China and hosting them over the years. The Chinese audience has seen Lajos Szalay's life work of nearly 360 graphics. In 2013, the collection was presented in Chongqing, followed by Hangzhou and Shanghai (2014). In December 2013, KOGART hosted a unique traditional ink painting exhibition from the Chongqing Three Gorges Museum.

In recent years, major Chinese cultural projects, such as the Ancient China Exhibition organized jointly by the Szeged Móra Ferenc Museum, the Shanghai Museum, and the Suzhou Museum in 2023, have attracted significant interest, drawing 62,000 visitors in Szeged. Curator Györgyi Fajcsák stated that the exhibition was a breakthrough in the series of China exhibitions in Hungary due to its unique, inter-museum professional collaboration. The connection between collections and the exchange of professionals have become more active and dynamic.

4. Civil Diplomacy – The Significance of the BRI and the Fifth Pillar

Along with policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, and financial integration, the last pillar of the BRI focuses on people-to-people relations (P2P) or, in Chinese, 民心相通 (minxin xiangtong), meaning “connections between the hearts of people.” The concrete programs and projects associated with this pillar reveal that people-to-people relations are broadly defined by both China and the host countries, encompassing everything from scientific cooperation and cultural programs to student exchanges and the building of relationships between social organizations. This pillar covers elements that do not fit into the other four categories, involving constructive interactions between Chinese and foreign actors. Promoting culture, primarily through cultural diplomacy, is a key tool for building these connections, and it is an area where the state can play an active role. This study examines how China has implemented cultural relationship-building with Hungary as part of

the fifth pillar of the BRI, focusing on the institutional network developed to strengthen people-to-people connections.

4.1. Trust

Although people-to-people relations appear as the last pillar in the official list and their benefits are hard to quantify and communicate and are less visible compared to massive construction projects, they actually form the foundation for all other pillars in the long run. Certainly, a business deal or a smaller investment can be realized with superficial acquaintance, without deep mutual understanding. However, if the cooperation between two or more countries is to move beyond simple transactions, trust is essential. Without it, fruitful and enduring cooperation is unimaginable due to the extra costs associated with distrust. Trust can only be established through understanding the other party over time, as we cannot trust the unknown. If we accept that establishing at least some form of *modus vivendi*, if not constructive cooperation, with China—one of the world's most important powers—is necessary for maintaining global peace and development and avoiding major conflicts, then people-to-people relations are indispensable.

The BRI is fundamentally a vision aimed at creating a connected, intensively interacting, and continuously cooperating Afro-Eurasian supercontinent, implying much deeper connections than simple commercial and financial transactions or infrastructural investments. Elements such as policy coordination or financial integration go beyond mere quid-pro-quo relationships. The vision can only work if the connections across various domains are underpinned by appropriate trust, which requires people-to-people relations at all levels.

4.2. Challenges for China

For China, understanding plays a crucial role because it is an independent civilization that has historically tended to isolate itself from the outside world. Thus, despite diplomatic niceties mentioning decades- or centuries-old friendships, relationship-building with most countries joining the BRI has almost started from scratch. China's status as an independent civilization also means that intercultural

communication issues and difficulties are prevalent in almost every international relationship, and people-to-people relations between Chinese and non-Chinese individuals are cross-cultural interactions. This poses several challenges and underscores the necessity for active state involvement in developing and overcoming obstacles in international and intercultural relations.

China's situation is further complicated by the fact that, particularly in the Western world, the media and public discourse are dominated by actors who are antagonistic to China's rise. This makes it challenging to establish the trust necessary for long-term cooperation. The discourse around China is largely influenced by entities that China has little to no impact on, with Chinese viewpoints rarely appearing or, if they do, being framed in ways that make them unacceptable to the public. The impact of mainstream Western media extends well beyond the Western world, influencing perceptions of China even in the Global South. This can be mitigated if individuals have positive experiences with China and the Chinese people, as personal experiences can override media portrayals. (As the Chinese saying goes: 百闻不如一见, meaning “seeing once is better than hearing a hundred times.”)

5. The Soft Power Aspect

When analyzing the issue from a power perspective, it is evident that people-to-people relations are closely related to the concept of soft power. Achieving the goal of making “others want what we want”, as suggested by a common definition of soft power, means influencing others' thinking through appeal and example. This requires them to understand our viewpoints, values, and value system. Without such understanding, we can only influence others through hard power or economic means—both of which are costly and uncertain. Hard power is expensive and uncertain, while economic means do not extend beyond transactional relationships, thus being insufficient for long-term, multidimensional cooperation. Soft power facilitates a country's interests in other areas as well, and it is not a zero-sum game, making it acceptable to all players. The tools for building people-to-people relations and increasing soft power overlap significantly, making the fifth pillar of the BRI a natural extension and expansion of China's soft power strategy, which was initiated in the 2000s.

5.1. State Participation

A crucial element of people-to-people relations is the promotion of cultural exchanges and making each other's cultural creations accessible. These relationships naturally extend beyond cultural programs, but it is in these programs where state projects, visions, support, and strategies can play a prominent role. In the Chinese context, people-to-people relations also include activities such as dining at a Chinese restaurant or participating in a kung fu class, which occur spontaneously without state intervention and can be rather incidental. For countries within the same cultural sphere or where American pop culture and lifestyle are universally present, such spontaneous interactions have the most impact. The influence of Hollywood movies, Swedish furniture, or Spanish football on the perception, prestige, and acceptance of the sending country occurs without the active involvement of the respective state. However, in different cultures, spontaneous relationship-building is difficult due to language, cultural, and geographical barriers, necessitating conscious support for these relationships. The most straightforward way to achieve this is through the promotion of cultural products and broad cultural diplomacy activities.

5.2. Chinese State Actors in Hungary's Cultural Presence

To develop people-to-people relations, China has established a complex institutional system in Hungary, consisting primarily of three types of actors: first, Chinese state actors (which do not necessarily represent the central government but are often linked to local institutions); second, social organizations that presumably have connections with state actors; and third, private actors. On the Hungarian side, these are complemented by state and civil organizations.

From the perspective of the Chinese central government, the main bodies overseeing cultural diplomacy and efforts to enhance soft power are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (外交部), the Ministry of Science and Technology (科学技术部), the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅游部), and the Ministry of Education (教育部). These organizations follow the guidelines set by the Chinese Communist Party in cultural diplomacy, as reinforced by the foreign relations law adopted in the summer of 2023.

5.3. The Chinese Embassy

The official representative of the People's Republic of China in Hungary is the Chinese Embassy in Budapest, which not only engages in traditional diplomatic activities but also plays a role in building people-to-people relations and overseeing, supporting, and orienting other actors. The embassy has a dedicated Cultural and Educational Section, which includes an Educational Office responsible for student exchange programs and state scholarships. The embassy itself organizes cultural events (receptions, film screenings, Lunar New Year celebrations, conferences), co-organizes programs with other organizations (e.g., Chinese Language Bridge competitions), and lends its representative presence to cultural events that align with Chinese cultural diplomacy objectives. Embassy diplomats support and legitimize many events by appearing as distinguished guests or giving opening speeches.

It is typical to see competition between state and semi-state actors to secure the participation of Chinese Embassy representatives in their programs. The presence of diplomats is an important endorsement for home partners and sponsors, affirming that a particular program has received the Chinese state's support and recognition. However, this can be problematic as the Hungarian audience is not accustomed to official speeches preceding theatrical performances or concerts. Elevating cultural events to official occasions may diminish their enjoyability and effectiveness. Greater consideration of cultural differences is needed in this area.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the embassy's cultural activities significantly decreased, with no events held between 2020 and 2022—national holiday receptions were even held online. The first in-person cultural program since the end of 2019 took place in March 2023.

5.4. Confucius Institutes

In the 2000s, under the leadership of President Hu Jintao, China recognized the importance of soft power and began to develop it consciously as a state task. One of the most important tools for this effort was the network of Confucius Institutes (孔子学院), which began to be established in 2004. The Confucius

Institutes, as official Chinese language and cultural institutions, are set up in a unique structure: supported by Hanban (汉办, formerly the Confucius Institute Headquarters / Chinese Language Council International 孔子学院总部/国家汉办, now the Center for Chinese Language Exchange and Cooperation 中外语言交流合作中心) under the Chinese Ministry of Education, they are created as joint projects between a Chinese and a foreign university. Each institute has two directors, one Chinese and one from the host country. Therefore, establishing a Confucius Institute requires collaboration between a Chinese university and a foreign university, approval and support from Hanban, and local political backing if possible. Hanban is also responsible for programs such as the Chinese Language Bridge (汉语桥) competition for university and high school students, the HSK (汉语水平考试) language test, the YCT (中小学生汉语水平考试) for general and middle school students, the BCT (商务中文考试) business Chinese test, the Confucius Scholarship (孔子学院奖学金), and the latest Confucius China Studies Program (孔子新汉学计划).

It is worth noting that in the second half of the 2010s, Hanban was reorganized several times, and for a long period, no leader was appointed. In 2020, it was renamed, and today, the Confucius Institutes are supervised by the International Chinese Language Foundation (中国国际中文教育基金会) under the Ministry of Education. These changes caused significant disruptions in the operation of Confucius Institutes, with leaders reporting constant uncertainty and unpredictability.

In Hungary, the network for promoting Chinese language and culture is centered around Confucius Institutes. Currently, there are five such institutes in Hungary, a notably high number for a country of this size. For comparison, there are two in the Czech Republic, two in Austria, two in Serbia, and four in Romania. The Confucius Institutes in Hungary, in order of their establishment, are:

- **ELTE Confucius Institute:** Hungary's first Confucius Institute, opened in 2006 through the collaboration of ELTE and Beijing Language and Culture University, supported by Hanban, at ELTE's Faculty of Humanities. This institute won the Confucius Institute of Excellence Award in 2007, 2011, and 2012, and Director Imre Hamar received a Chinese state award in 2011. In 2014, it established the Confucius Institute Regional Education Center for

Central and Eastern Europe, which provides further training for Chinese language teachers in Central and Eastern Europe.

- **Szeged University Confucius Institute:** Opened in 2012 in Szeged through the collaboration of the University of Szeged and Shanghai International Studies University, with Hanban's support. The institute places strong emphasis on introducing Chinese culture, in addition to language teaching.
- **Miskolc University Confucius Institute:** Established in 2013 in Miskolc in partnership with Beijing University of Chemical Technology. The institute's creation was influenced by the largest Chinese investment in Hungary at that time, the acquisition of BorsodChem by the Chinese Wanhua company. It continues to collaborate with the Wanhua-BorsodChem group.
- **Pécs University Traditional Chinese Medicine Confucius Institute:** Established in 2014 in Pécs, with the North China University of Science and Technology as its Chinese partner. Notably, this institute not only engages in general language and cultural activities but also focuses on promoting traditional Chinese medicine as part of the Pécs University Faculty of Health Sciences.
- **Debrecen University Confucius Institute:** The fifth institute, opened in the autumn of 2019, in partnership with Tianjin Foreign Studies University. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic starting shortly after its opening, it only recently became truly active.

Confucius Institutes organize Chinese language courses open to anyone, advertise language courses within their host universities for students to earn credits, and perhaps most significantly, conduct Chinese language classes in local high schools, which may even offer Chinese as an A-level subject. They also serve as important cultural centers, regularly organizing various programs from promotional lectures to Lunar New Year galas and calligraphy and paper-cutting classes. Particularly in rural areas, Confucius Institutes are key players in local cultural life, with local media regularly reporting on their activities.

Only the last two of these institutes have opened during the BRI period. The Belt and Road Initiative has provided new momentum to existing institutes and impacted their activities. For example, they have organized Silk Road-themed

events, and promoting the BRI has become part of their mission. At ELTE, the Belt and Road Research Center was established, which essentially operates symbiotically with the ELTE Confucius Institute, sharing the same location and leadership.

5.5. Hungarian State and State-Supported Institutions

In addition to outlining the institutional framework and presenting Hungarian-Chinese initiatives and projects, it is worthwhile highlighting some Hungarian-founded organizations and institutions that also play a crucial role in nurturing Sino-Hungarian people-to-people relations. These institutions typically collaborate closely with various Chinese counterparts and, therefore, indirectly support China's cultural diplomacy and soft power efforts. In many of their projects, Chinese organizations play an important role.

5.5.1. Chinese Departments and Other Academic Institutions

First and foremost, it is important to mention that three Hungarian universities host Chinese departments. Among these, the largest and oldest is the Chinese Department at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), which was previously discussed. Its predecessor was established a hundred years ago in 1923 (some sources say 1924), and systematic Chinese language instruction began in the 1950s, following the diplomatic recognition between the two states. For a time, it was called the Department of Chinese and East Asian Studies; today, it is known as the Chinese Department. Its activities are closely intertwined with the ELTE Confucius Institute, sharing leadership and operating in the same building. The department mainly focuses on classical sinological research and has become a significant international center for the study of Chinese Buddhism. The journal *East Asian Studies*, published by the department, is one of the most important Hungarian-language journals in classical Oriental studies. The activities of the ELTE Chinese Department are supported by the Hungarian Foundation for Chinese Studies.

At Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPKE), the Chinese Department was established in 2012. It differentiates itself from similar institutions by focusing on modern Chinese society, politics, and culture rather than traditional studies.

Accordingly, the East Asian Studies master's program here does not engage in traditional sinology but provides a social science education with a strong practical focus. Since 2014, the PPKE's Department of Chinese Studies has been linked with the Modern East Asia Research Group, which operates under the PEACH (Pázmány East Asia Club, Hungary) brand. Over nearly a decade, it has organized more than a hundred conferences, workshops, panel discussions, student conferences, and other programs, published over a dozen books in the Typotex Panta series, and produced the Orient Express podcast, approaching its 200th episode.

At Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, a Chinese undergraduate program (officially Eastern Languages and Cultures with a Chinese specialization) began in 2020, complementing its long-standing Japanese studies. The first cohort graduated in 2023, and the students achieved impressive academic results.

The Chinese departments play a crucial role in training experts interested in China and those proficient in the Chinese language and culture. They are also significant in the implementation of numerous scholarship programs, such as the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) student exchange programs and educational collaborations. Scholarships and studies in China greatly contribute to achieving the goals associated with the BRI's fifth pillar, as there is no more effective way to familiarize people with China than enabling them to spend an extended period at a Chinese university. Research supports the positive relationship between scholarships and perceptions of China. Besides education, the Chinese departments are key players in China studies, reinforcing the academic aspect of people-to-people relations.

It is also worth noting that the BRI inspired the establishment of the MTA-ELTE-SZTE Silk Road Research Group, which existed from 2017 to 2022. This research group, involving active participation from ELTE Chinese Department staff, examined interactions between peoples and cultures along the ancient Silk Road, a precursor to the Belt and Road Initiative, and achieved significant scientific results.

Another BRI-related development was the launch of the *Studies on Cultures along the Silk Road* journal in 2018. This English-Chinese periodical is co-published by the Institute of Ethnology at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Minority Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The Institute of Ethnology's relationship with China has also been strengthened through other BRI-related activities.

5.5.2. Hopp Ferenc Asian Art Museum

The Hopp Museum, established in 1923 in the former villa of collector and optician Ferenc Hopp, is currently a specialized museum within the Museum of Fine Arts. Its collection focuses on the art of the Far East, with a prominent place occupied by Chinese artifacts. As one of the few museums in the region dedicated to the study and presentation of Chinese visual and applied arts, it plays a major role in the research and dissemination of Chinese art in Hungary. The museum organizes numerous Chinese-themed exhibitions, publishes books, and hosts cultural programs in collaboration with Chinese institutions. Therefore, it plays an important role in the artistic aspect of Sino-Hungarian people-to-people relations.

5.5.3. Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual Primary School and High School

Opened in September 2004 in the XVth district of Budapest, the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual Primary School and High School operates under an agreement between the ministries of education of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Hungary. Uniquely in Europe, the school provides education in both Hungarian and Chinese, with mixed Hungarian and Chinese students. Although the school is an integral part of the Hungarian education system, it receives significant support from China and is frequently visited by Chinese politicians. Initially, the majority of students were Chinese, but today, most of the students are Hungarian, whose parents recognize the importance of China and the Chinese language. The school has gradually expanded to become a full-fledged institution with 12 grades, adding high school classes as the initial primary school grades graduated.

5.5.4. Eurasia Center

Established in 2021, the Eurasia Center operates within the Neumann János University in Budapest in collaboration with the Hungarian National Bank. The Center operates on the premise that Eurasia should be treated as a unified continent, promoting the development of interconnections between its countries. The institution produces scientific and educational materials on current issues affecting Eurasian countries, publishes books, and manages the *Eurasia Magazine* and *Eurasia Review* journals. It organizes conferences and panel discussions and is active on social media. Since China is a key state in Eurasia, much of its material is related to China, and it maintains good relations with Chinese state, academic, and educational organizations.

6. Nonprofit Organizations in the Bilateral Cultural Relationship Between Hungary and China

Among the cultural threads in the bilateral cultural relationship, many nonprofit organizations have emerged thanks to long-standing successful civil collaborations. There are several Hungarian and Chinese nonprofit organizations that consider it their mission to foster Hungarian-Chinese cultural relations. Some of these organizations' activities are introduced below although the list is not exhaustive.

6.1. The Chinese Art Center

The Chinese Art Center, a significant social organization focusing on Chinese culture and arts, has been a key player in this field for nearly thirty years under the leadership of President Gábor Cserkész and Vice President Ma Ying. Since 2000, it has established independent cultural workshops such as Hungary's first calligraphy school (the Chinese Calligraphy Portal, n.d.), where it has organized exhibitions and open workshops with Chinese instructors. The organization deals with the research and teaching of authentic Chinese martial arts within the framework of the Awakening Dragon Authentic Kungfu School. Through its research, it publishes and makes available unique specialized translations

for all Hungarian practitioners, bringing Chinese perspectives and martial arts philosophy closer to them and supporting daily practices.

The Art Center facilitates live collaborations in classical music through President Gábor Cserkész, who is also the founder of the Hungarian-Chinese Chamber Orchestra. Their live radio program, "Flowers of China," in collaboration with China Radio International (CRI), shaped and addressed stakeholders in the Hungarian-Chinese sphere daily from 2003 for seven years. This open and diverse community actively participates in and shapes Hungarian-Chinese cultural and social collaborations, representing enduring values that aid understanding and acceptance, contributing to maintaining a multicultural community and the uninterrupted development of Hungarian-Chinese cultural exchange.

6.2. The Hungarian-Chinese Cultural Association

Since its establishment in 2015, this nonprofit organization has actively supported cultural exchange programs between the two countries. It organizes events and functions as a bridge between Europe, Hungary, and China. Its activities strengthen cultural, economic, and trade relations and aid in the overseas development of the Chinese cultural industry. According to the association's President, Teng Wei Jie, founder and editor-in-chief of *Új Szemle*, "The Association quickly responded to the strategic linking of the Belt and Road Initiative and Hungary's 'Eastern Opening' policy, and the Chinese government's decision to accelerate the development of the cultural industry." In 2016, the popular Chinese Spring Festival was first held, where Hungarian participants could explore Chinese tourism, health preservation, martial arts, calligraphy, tea culture, and traditional Chinese clothing. In recent years, the festival has been held in Budapest and several other cities. The association's diverse activities are widely promoted through media appearances. The association's Vice President, Geng Jie, editor of the *Új Szemle* (Xin Dao Bao) Chinese-language weekly newspaper, has been providing information on political, economic, social, and international news, travel, leisure, and fashion to local and regional Chinese residents since 2000. *Új Szemle* is also available on the WeChat platform (Geng-Teng, 2024).

6.3. Friendship Societies and Social Organizations

6.3.1. The Hungarian-Chinese Friendship Society

The Hungarian-Chinese Friendship Society (MKBT) 匈中友好协会 was founded as a civil initiative in 1959, making it the oldest organization promoting Chinese culture and developing Chinese relations in Hungary. The society's activities gradually declined after 1963 due to the deterioration in Hungarian-Chinese political relations, but it was revived in 1988 mainly by professionals, scholars, diplomats, and journalists who had previously visited China and had direct knowledge of Chinese culture and people. The MKBT organizes educational lectures, friendly meetings, and mutual visits, participates in cultural events related to China (e.g., exhibitions, concerts, book presentations), and promotes Chinese cultural events. Due to personnel overlap, the society is also connected to the Kínaiirodalom.hu website and the successful Contemporary Chinese Book Club event series.

6.3.2. The Hungarian-Chinese Youth Friendship Association

The Hungarian-Chinese Youth Friendship Association 匈中青年友好协会 was established in 2022 by 15 Hungarian youths who have played an important role in building Chinese-Hungarian relations in recent years. The association organizes cultural programs and roundtable discussions, participates in international and domestic events, and aims to promote cooperation between Chinese and Hungarian youth. The association is closely linked to the Eurasia Center's "China team."

6.3.3. The Chinese Art Center

The Chinese Art Center 匈中文化交流中心 has been operating since 1995, closely related to Chinese martial arts, but also engaged in extensive cultural promotion activities with a calligraphy and music workshop. It has many Chinese members (thus, it is considered more of a Hungarian-Chinese organization) and participates in organizing larger events, such as the Lunar New Year celebrations held at Millenáris in the 2010s.

6.3.4. Gate to Europe V4-China Association

The Gate to Europe V4-China Association was originally established in 2011 to support the Hungarian government's Eastern Opening policy as a Hungarian-Chinese organization. In 2017, its activities were modified to cover the other Visegrad Four countries as well. Its activities specifically include assisting the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the 16+1 initiative's cultural and scientific objectives, organizing conferences and cultural and other programs. According to its online platforms, it was last active in 2021.

6.3.5. Great Wall Hungarian-Chinese Friendship Association

The Great Wall Association is linked to an opposition Hungarian politician with a particular interest in China. The organization's activities are also supported by government actors through ideas such as the Chinese-Hungarian Friendship Award established in 2013 by the association along with several other organizations and usually presented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The association operates on the border of politics and cultural diplomacy, organizing programs, issuing artistic competition calls on Chinese themes, and participating in various cultural projects.

7. Conclusion

In the era of accelerated global communication, intercultural collaborations have become integral to the fabric of international relations, reflecting changes in the world around us and helping to reduce conflicts on a societal level. It is a significant achievement that Hungarian-Chinese relations span all areas of life, with cultural ties flourishing across various sectors. This success involves not only state actors but also cultural centers, professional diplomats, as well as civil society, educational, cultural, and artistic institutions. Economic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also play a role.

Notable progress has been made in these areas with China: Hungary is present in both the Chinese cultural and physical spaces, including festivals, concerts, books, exhibitions, cultural, gastronomic, and tourism events, and Hungarian

language education. The number of institutions teaching Hungarian in China is increasing, and more people are learning Chinese in Hungary. Language learning not only equips individuals with language skills but also brings them closer to understanding another country's way of thinking and culture.

Successful intercultural collaborations stand out by creatively emerging from today's information overload and initiating valuable, long-lasting processes, such as the Hudec project. The experience of the past 75 years supports the idea that civil initiatives focused on cultural cooperation are highly significant, addressing broad audiences, ensuring sustainable and predictable bilateral relations, and creating unique communication channels even when traditional diplomatic interactions face obstacles. The 21st century has seen a great resurgence in Hungarian-Chinese bilateral and cultural relations.

The rapidly evolving connections also offer opportunities to better understand China's current situation and realities and to be better understood by China. This is particularly important in today's world, and as Hungarian-Chinese relations blossom and become increasingly interconnected, cultural and human connections are increasingly valued. They lay the groundwork for further development in other areas, indirectly benefiting trade, investments, industrial, technological, and scientific collaborations, and supporting political and diplomatic relations as a form of soft power.

The BRI plays a crucial role in deepening human connections, as its other goals cannot be achieved without this pillar. Consequently, China has focused on developing this sphere in the past decade. In Hungary, a suitable institutional network has been established for consolidating the fifth pillar of the BRI. The Chinese state is prominently present, with five Confucius Institutes and a standalone Chinese Cultural Center representing Chinese soft power efforts in addition to the Chinese embassy in Budapest. The China-Central and Eastern Europe (CEECE) Regional Center and the Chinese Tourism Office work to enhance tourism relations, while the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences local institute supports scientific collaboration. Chinese state activities are complemented by social organizations of the Chinese community in Hungary, which, in accordance with Chinese customs and the specifics of the Chinese system, aim to advance the central objectives using their own means.

From the Hungarian side, there are state or state-supported institutions dedicated to research and education on China, and civil organizations have also emerged to promote Chinese culture either independently or with Chinese or Hungarian state support, serving the BRI's objectives.

Thus, the institutional framework is in place. However, the main issue seems to be the cultural content being conveyed. Most participants tend to play it safe, promoting well-established and low-risk aspects of Chinese culture, such as calligraphy, tea culture, dragon and lion dances, traditional songs and dances, martial arts, and paper cutting. The truly exciting cultural products are those that push boundaries, introduce something new, and are therefore controversial, debatable, and subject to criticism. These are the elements that attract young people the most. In China, these areas are thriving, from contemporary visual arts to hip-hop music and literature, but they rarely reach Hungary. When they do become available, it is often due to the efforts of individual enthusiasts rather than the institutional framework outlined above.