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WOUNDS AND NARRATIVES: CULTURAL TRAUMA, HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION, AND THE CHINA–HUNGARY RELATIONS SINCE 2010

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ABSTRACT: *This paper analyzes how national trauma narratives affect contemporary Chinese–Hungarian relations by comparing China's "Century of Humiliation" with Hungary's Trianon trauma. Drawing on Jeffrey C. Alexander's cultural trauma theory and a hermeneutic interpretive method, the study examines how these narratives, which emerged from major military conflicts since the Opium Wars and the First World War, produced the historical ruptures that later became central to both countries' identity formation. Although the traumas differ, they function similarly as state-mediated narratives that define collective identity and attribute responsibility to external actors associated with "the West". Through analysis of speeches, museums, and political discourses, the paper shows that both governments frame Western modernity and liberalism as threatening forces. In both countries, trauma narratives portray Western actors as unsympathetic to national sovereignty. The conclusion suggests that trauma-based identity constructions offer a key explanation for why Hungary, unlike other EU member states, exhibits a uniquely affirmative perception of China.*

KEYWORDS: *cultural trauma, historical memory, Trianon, "Century of Humiliation", Chinese–Hungarian relations, foreign policy narratives*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and Hungary have deepened to a degree unmatched by any other European Union member state. Since 2010, the Orbán government has articulated[1] a foreign policy doctrine premised on an "Eastern Opening", repositioning Hungary as a state that seeks strategic cooperation with rising non-Western powers and expresses[2] skepticism towards the political and normative authority of Western institutions. Simultaneously, Chinese political discourse has intensified[3] its narrative of rejuvenation following the "Century of Humiliation" framing

1 Greilinger 2023.
2 Lehoczki 2023.
3 Metcalf 2020.

global politics as a space in which Western hegemony is gradually eroding and new centers of civilizational power, most prominently China, are emerging. The convergence of these discourses raises a central question: Why do the political narratives of two states with profoundly different histories resonate so strongly, and how does this resonance affect their contemporary strategic alignment?

This paper argues that the strengthening of China–Hungary relations since 2010 can be partially explained through the lens of cultural trauma theory, as articulated[4] by Jeffrey C. Alexander, and understood through an interpretive-constructivist methodology[5] within international relations. The core proposition is not that Chinese and Hungarian historical experiences are identical, nor that their traumas are equivalent in scale or substance. Instead, the argument developed here follows a moderate comparative line: Hungary's Trianon narrative[6] and China's "Century of Humiliation"[7] constitute two distinct but structurally comparable instances of state-narrated historical grievance, both mobilized to interpret present geopolitical realities and justify foreign policy reorientation away from the liberal West.

This approach departs from traditional rationalist explanations of Chinese and Hungarian foreign policy, which typically emphasize material incentives: economic interdependence, investment flows, infrastructure financing, and strategic bargaining within the EU and NATO.[8] While these factors are significant, they do not sufficiently account for why Hungary, uniquely among EU member states, frames China not as a strategic risk or "necessary evil" but as a partner in building an alternative world order.[9] Economic interdependence clearly matters. It is most visible in Hungary's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, in the Chinese financing of the Budapest–Belgrade railway line, and in strategic bargaining within the EU. However, material incentives alone cannot explain Hungary's outlier status. Other Central and Eastern European states (notably Lithuania and the Czech Republic) have also received substantial Chinese economic overtures, yet have grown markedly more skeptical. Trauma narratives function here as a cognitive filter: they shape how Hungarian elites interpret and prioritize these opportunities as expressions of restored sovereignty rather than as threats to liberal norms. The present study, therefore, does not dismiss rationalist explanations but argues that cultural trauma supplies the crucial interpretive vocabulary that renders material cooperation politically and morally intelligible. While multiple Central and Eastern European states, most notably Lithuania, have grown increasingly skeptical of Chinese influence, Hungary has moved in the opposite direction.[10] Understanding this divergence requires attention to narrative interpretation: how states make sense of their historical position, how elites mobilize collective memory, and how cultural trauma becomes a resource for foreign policy construction.

Interpretive constructivism offers the most appropriate methodological grounding for this inquiry. Unlike rationalist or positivist models, interpretive international relations (IR) scholarship emphasizes[11] meaning-making practices, narrative frameworks, and socially

4 Alexander 2012, 6–30.
5 Johnstone – Sukumar 2025.
6 Ilg 2021.
7 Metcalf 2020.
8 Matura 2020.
9 Koleszár 2024.
10 Wang 2022.
11 Zehfuss 2002.

constructed identities as central determinants of state behavior. States do not simply act based on external constraints or material interests, rather, they interpret their environments through culturally embedded narratives that define threats, allies, responsibilities, and possibilities. In this context, cultural trauma is not merely a historical event, but a current interpretive lens reproduced through education, political discourse, commemorative practices, and institutionalized memory regimes.

In both China and Hungary, trauma narratives have been elevated to the level of national identity projects. China's "Century of Humiliation", encompassing imperialist encroachment by Western powers and Japan from 1839 to 1949, functions as the defining negative reference point against which national rejuvenation is framed.[12] Contemporary Chinese political discourse increasingly situates Japan within "the West" as part of a broader civilizational bloc historically responsible for China's subjugation, a reframing supported by recent historiographical analyses of Chinese nationalist discourse.[13] Similarly, Hungary's memory of the Treaty of Trianon operates as a foundational trauma shaping national identity.[14] These narratives, though distinct in origin and structure, allow political elites in both states to interpret the liberal West not as a benign normative order but as a historically intrusive force whose dominance must be questioned.[15]

This paper develops its argument in three stages. The first part introduces the interpretive-constructivist approach and Alexander's cultural trauma framework, clarifying the methodological tools used in this study. The second part provides a detailed examination of the Chinese case, focusing on institutionalized trauma narratives, the political construction of humiliation, and the hermeneutic extension of "the West" to include Japan. The third part analyzes the Hungarian case, tracing the evolution of the Trianon narrative and contemporary anti-Western memory politics. The conclusion offers a comparative analysis, demonstrating how these trauma narratives produce a shared interpretive vocabulary conducive to alignment, culminating in Hungary's unique position as the only EU member state that does not frame China as a systemic rival. In the broader European context, this stance remains exceptional: while Germany and France pursue pragmatic but rivalry-framed engagement, and most CEE states (e.g., Lithuania) have cooled relations over security and EU coordination concerns, Hungary has consistently resisted critical EU language towards China, vetoed joint statements, and hosted high-level forums such as the Budapest Eurasia Forum. The conclusion reflects on implications for European foreign policy, Chinese global strategy, and the broader role of historical trauma in shaping international relations.

The research is additionally informed by limited fieldwork insights derived from conversations with Chinese students during a year of study in China. These discussions, while anecdotal, served as an initial stimulus for the present investigation and indicated the depth with which trauma-infused narratives permeate everyday political discourse. Although not used as empirical data, these experiences underscore the interpretive dimension at the core of this research.

Together, these components provide a comprehensive account of how historical grievances, when narrated through culturally resonant frameworks, may facilitate unexpected geopolitical alignments. China and Hungary are not bound by geography, culture, or polit-

[12] Kaufman 2011.
[13] Stevens 2025.
[14] Ilg 2021.
[15] Orbán 2025; Hornok 2025.

ical system, yet they find common ground in trauma-derived skepticism towards Western universalism. Understanding this dynamic requires a methodological approach that foregrounds interpretation, narrative, and meaning; precisely the analytic contribution interpretive constructivism offers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND HERMENEUTIC INTERPRETATION

Introducing the Cultural Trauma Theory

Cultural trauma theory offers a way to understand how political communities construct meaning around historical suffering. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines[16] cultural trauma as a process in which a collectivity comes to believe that it has suffered a profound wound that leaves lasting marks on its collective identity. The trauma is not inherent in the event itself. It becomes trauma when a society interprets it as a moral injury that reshapes how the community understands itself and its place in the world. This means that cultural trauma is fundamentally a meaning-making process. It is produced through narratives, symbols, public performances, and institutions that present certain past events as foundational wounds.

The Trauma Process

Alexander proposes that cultural trauma emerges through a structured process that involves several key components. There must be a carrier group: this is a set of actors, often political elites, intellectuals, clerics, or cultural leaders, who articulate the narrative of suffering and interpret it for the wider community. There must also be a clearly defined victim identity, in which the group claims that the injury harmed the core of who they are. The process includes the attribution of responsibility, which identifies the agents held accountable for the wound. Finally, the trauma narrative must be institutionalized through education, public rituals, memorials, and cultural production. Through this institutionalization, trauma becomes a stable part of collective identity and a lasting interpretive framework for understanding contemporary political realities. Alexander's model, therefore, provides a conceptual map for analyzing how both China and Hungary construct and sustain their dominant narratives of historical injury.

Hermeneutic Interpretive Method

Hermeneutics, understood as the systematic study of meaning, offers a methodological foundation for examining cultural trauma. It originates in classical philology and theology, but it has become a standard method across political theory, anthropology, and intellectual history. Hermeneutics takes seriously the idea that humans act based on interpretations, not objective facts alone. Its task is to reconstruct the horizons of meaning within which communities understand their past, their moral commitments, and their political choices.[17]

[16] Alexander 2012, 6–30.
[17] Ricoeur 1984, 139–170.

Rather than measuring variables, hermeneutics interprets symbolic content such as texts, rituals, commemorations, and political speeches. This makes it particularly useful for exploring how trauma narratives shape identity and orient foreign policy behavior.

The Concept of the West

A key element in both Chinese and Hungarian trauma narratives is the construction of an entity referred to as "the West". In these contexts, the West is not primarily understood as a geographical space, but as a symbolic category associated with a particular form of modernity, liberal political order, colonial expansion, and global economic dominance.[18] It functions as an imagined actor endowed with moral qualities, often portrayed as arrogant, interventionist, or hegemonic.[19] Through this symbolic construction, historical suffering is interpreted, and moral responsibility is assigned, allowing national communities to organize collective memory around experiences of injustice or humiliation.

In Chinese political discourse, this symbolic West has expanded beyond Europe and North America to include Japan. Japanese imperial expansion is interpreted as having mirrored the practices and ambitions of Western colonial powers through military conquest, territorial annexation, and economic exploitation. Moreover, Japan's integration into the international order dominated by Western states reinforces its classification within the same symbolic framework. As a result, Japan is commonly presented as having joined the Western camp, and its actions are interpreted within the broader narrative of historical humiliation that attributes China's suffering to Western modernity, imperialism, and global dominance. In this sense, the West functions as a negative moral reference point against which national identity and historical experience are defined.[20]

A similar symbolic logic operates within Hungarian political discourse, particularly in relation to the trauma of Trianon. The West is frequently portrayed as arrogant, hypocritical, or indifferent to Hungarian suffering, especially during moments of historical rupture. This perception is rooted in the belief that Western great powers failed to acknowledge Hungary's historical continuity, moral claims, and national interests during the post-war settlement.[21] Consequently, the West is often depicted less as a community of shared values and more as a distant and unreliable authority. This interpretive framework continues to shape contemporary Hungarian attitudes towards Western institutions, which are frequently perceived as imposing norms and judgments without sufficient sensitivity to national history and identity.

Across both cases, the West operates as a symbolic benchmark through which historical trauma is interpreted and national self-understanding is articulated. Rather than serving merely as an external reference, it becomes a central organizing concept that structures moral evaluation, political skepticism, and narratives of collective victimhood.

[18] Hall 1996, 184–227.
[19] Chakrabarty 2000, 27–29.
[20] Wang 2012, 30–100.
[21] Romsics 2002, 171–230.

Bridge to Case Studies

This theoretical framework provides the tools for analyzing the Chinese Century of Humiliation narrative and the Hungarian Trianon narrative. Alexander's trauma process clarifies how these narratives were constructed through carrier groups, victim definitions, and institutionalization. In this study, particular attention is given to the attribution of responsibility, because the construction of a perpetrator is the moment when traumatic memory gains moral force. It is at this stage that communities define who injured them, how the injury fits into a wider civilizational context, and why the trauma matters for present political identity formation. This makes the category of the West a central object of interpretation in both the Chinese and Hungarian cases. Hermeneutics offers a method to interpret the symbolic and moral content embedded in these narratives. Finally, the concept of the West allows us to understand why both states direct their traumatic memories towards a shared symbolic adversary.

The selection of sources followed a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture institutionalized elite-level trauma narratives. For the Chinese case, I examined key official speeches by Hu Jintao (2011) and Xi Jinping (2012, 2017, 2019), the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall as the paradigmatic site of memory, and post-1990s textbook reforms as analyzed by Zheng Wang and Edward Vickers. For the Hungarian case, the analysis draws on Viktor Orbán's major foreign-policy addresses (2014 Tusnádfürdő, 2024 Budapest Eurasia Forum), the Trianon Museum and National Cohesion Memorial, and the scholarly literature on Trianon memory politics (Romsics, Ilg, Gyurgyák). The hermeneutic process involved close textual reading to identify recurring motifs of victimhood, perpetrator attribution to "the West", and moral lessons of sovereignty and rejuvenation. These motifs were then cross-referenced with Alexander's four-component trauma process (carrier group, victim identity, responsibility attribution, institutionalization). This interpretive-constructivist approach prioritizes a thick description of meaning-making over quantification, ensuring conclusions emerge directly from the symbolic content.

CHINA'S CULTURAL TRAUMA NARRATIVE: THE CENTURY OF HUMILIATION

Defining the Narrative

The Century of Humiliation[22] functions as the core historical trauma in modern Chinese national identity. It refers to the period roughly from the First Opium War to the Japanese surrender in 1945. This period marks a sequence of defeats, unequal treaties, foreign spheres of influence, and direct occupation. The narrative presents these events as a prolonged moment in which China lost control over its sovereignty, territory, and cultural authority. Within contemporary Chinese political culture, this trauma is a foundational story that explains why the modern nation must remain vigilant when facing foreign powers.

[22] Kaufman 2011.

Key Elements of the Narrative

The trauma narrative, according to Alexander's theory,[23] acquires meaning by assigning roles and shaping a moral lesson. The victim is defined as the Chinese nation, understood as an enduring collective that suffered fragmentation, humiliation, and the breakdown of legitimate authority. Responsibility is placed on the Western imperial powers that imposed unequal treaties, enforced extraterritorial privileges, and exploited China's internal crises. The wound is therefore described as the loss of sovereignty, the humiliation of forced concessions, and the inability to defend the nation. The moral lesson stresses the need for unity, national strength, and political renewal, because only a strong China can prevent the recurrence of foreign domination. This narrative structure follows Alexander's model in which trauma becomes a collective identity marker that guides contemporary political interpretations.

Japan as Part of the West

Chinese political discourse often incorporates Japan into a broader category of Western imperialist aggression. This interpretation does not depend on geographical classification. It emerges from the perception that Japan adopted Western industrial, military, and imperial models and then applied them in East Asia. Scholars of memory politics, such as William Callahan[24] and Zheng Wang,[25] point out that Chinese textbooks and official speeches often depict Japan as an extension of the same imperial logic that produced the earlier Western intrusions. This framing allows the narrative to maintain continuity from the Opium Wars to the atrocities committed during the Second Sino–Japanese War.

Institutionalization in Museums

The Museum of the Nanjing Massacre is not the only institution commemorating the century of humiliation, but it occupies a central place in the institutional reproduction[26] of China's trauma narrative. Its architectural design[27] directs visitors through a sequence that moves from shock to mourning and finally to political reflection. The entrance route uses statues of terrified civilians, soundscapes of sirens, and symbolic ruins to create an immediate moral atmosphere of vulnerability. Inside, large photographic panels, pit memorials with human remains, and documentary footage reconstruct the violence as a moment of absolute powerlessness. The museum's narrative structure guides the visitor from the collapse of Nanjing's defense to mass killings, sexual violence, and the international tribunal records. The final exhibition space turns explicitly political. It stresses that the massacre occurred because China was weak and divided, and highlights slogans encouraging unity, vigilance, and national strength. Museum researchers such as Kirk Denton note[28] that the site functions as a pedagogical institution that aligns historical suffering with the Party's claim that rejuvenation is the only guarantee against renewed humiliation.

[23] Alexander 2012, 6–30.
[24] Callahan 2004.
[25] Wang 2012, 30–100.
[26] Matson 2024.
[27] ArchDaily 2017; Contested Histories Initiative 2024.
[28] Denton 2014, 135–152.



Figure 1 *Imperialism 1900: The bear represents Russia, the lion Britain, the frog France, the sun Japan, and the eagle the United States*

Source: *Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_situation_in_the_Far_East_by_Tse_Tsan-tai.jpg*

Institutionalization in Textbooks

Education and mass culture further consolidate the Century of Humiliation narrative. Studies by Zheng Wang[29] and Edward Vickers[30] demonstrate that state textbook reforms after the 1990s' patriotic education campaign shifted the emphasis from class struggle to national humiliation. Textbooks describe the late Qing period as a time when foreign powers carved up China, and they repeatedly use formulations such as "a weak nation with no diplomacy". These curricular materials encourage students to interpret sovereignty as inherently fragile and to view foreign pressure as structurally similar to the intervention of earlier imperial powers.

Contemporary Political Use

The Century of Humiliation has become a central interpretive framework used by the Chinese state to justify strategic autonomy, ideological security, and national rejuvenation. Xi Jinping's speeches repeatedly situate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) authority in its capacity to overcome this traumatic past and to prevent its recurrence.

The theme gained renewed prominence in high-level Party rhetoric during Hu Jintao's 2011 address marking the 19th anniversary of the CCP, in which he described[31] the period from the Opium Wars to 1949 as a time when China was subjugated and bullied by foreign imperialist powers. Hu presented the Party as the historical force that ended this era of humiliation and restored national dignity, linking the CCP's legitimacy directly to its ability to defend sovereignty. When Xi Jinping came to power a year later, he amplified this narrative. He positioned national rejuvenation as the Party's central mission, thereby reinforcing the idea that the CCP and the protection of China's sovereignty are inseparable.

The political significance of this trauma narrative was articulated more fully in Xi's 2012 address at the National Museum during the opening of the "Road to Rejuvenation" exhibition. He described[32] the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the darkest period in the nation's history and stated that national rejuvenation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people. This speech was a key moment in the institutionalization of trauma memory. It publicly linked past humiliation to the Party's contemporary governing mission, signaling that China's rise should be understood as a historical correction to earlier injustice.

The narrative gained further strategic meaning during the Nineteenth Party Congress in 2017. Here, Xi connected[33] historical humiliation to three major policy agendas. First, he emphasized technological self-reliance as a condition for overcoming the vulnerabilities that once allowed foreign powers to dominate China. Second, he framed military modernization as necessary to ensure that China can never again suffer the defeats associated with the late Qing era. Third, he presented independence from Western political norms as essential for protecting China's cultural identity and political system. These interpretations demonstrate that trauma memory informs domestic governance and global strategy at the highest level.

[29] Wang 2012, 33–100.
[30] Vickers 2022.
[31] Jintao 2011.
[32] Jinping 2012.
[33] Xinhua 2017.

The same themes appeared in Xi's speech celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic in 2019. He declared[34] that the Chinese people will never again be humiliated and warned that any force that tries to bully China will break its head against a Great Wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people. This formulation links collective memory with contemporary deterrence, presenting national unity and state power as the moral lessons derived from trauma.

A central political theme under Xi Jinping is the idea that foreign ideological influence constitutes a contemporary extension of the pressures China faced during the Century of Humiliation.[35] This framing appears consistently in his speeches on national security and ideological work. The same logic underpins Document Number Nine,[36] an internal Party directive that warns against Western constitutionalism, universal values, and civil society. The document portrays these concepts not as neutral political principles but as instruments of foreign interference designed to weaken China's political sovereignty and ideological cohesion. Together, Xi's security discourse and Document Number Nine reinforce a narrative in which vigilance against external ideological pressure is essential to preventing new forms of national humiliation.

Public Opinion or Party Opinion?

While public opinion data in China is limited and cannot be used in the same way as in electoral democracies, the effectiveness of trauma narratives does not primarily depend on measurable mass approval. In the Chinese context, what matters most is the degree to which the narrative is accepted and reproduced by the Party state. Once a historical interpretation is consolidated within elite political discourse and institutionalized through education, media, and commemorative practices, it acquires the status of an authoritative national memory. Even if individual interpretations vary at the societal level, the Party's monopoly over official historical meaning ensures a high level of narrative coherence. As a result, the trauma narrative functions less as a reflection of popular sentiment and more as a top-down interpretive framework that structures how history, sovereignty, and foreign relations are publicly understood. This makes elite-level consensus more analytically significant than individual-level attitudes when assessing the foreign policy implications of trauma in the case of China.

HUNGARY'S CULTURAL TRAUMA NARRATIVE: TRIANON AND NATIONAL LOSS

The Core Narrative

The Treaty of Trianon, prepared at the Paris Peace Conference and signed in 1920, constitutes the central traumatic event of modern Hungarian national memory. As a result of the treaty, Hungary lost approximately two-thirds of its pre-war territory and more than half

[34] Xinhua 2019.
[35] Metcalf 2020.
[36] ChinaFile 2013.

of its population, including large Hungarian-speaking communities that suddenly found themselves

outside the borders of the new state. Beyond its immediate geopolitical consequences, Trianon has come to symbolize a profound rupture in Hungarian historical continuity. It is widely remembered not simply as a diplomatic settlement following the First World War, but as a national catastrophe that inflicted lasting moral and psychological damage. Over time, this event has been elevated into a foundational wound within Hungarian national mythology, shaping narratives of loss, injustice, and historical betrayal.

Elements of the Trauma Construction

Hungarian political discourse constructed the nation primarily as a collective victim of an externally imposed injustice during the past century. Within this narrative, responsibility for the trauma is attributed largely to Western great powers, particularly those that shaped the post-war settlement process. The Treaty of Trianon is portrayed not as the outcome of neutral geopolitical calculations, but as a morally illegitimate act that disregarded historical continuities, ethnic realities, and Hungary's claim to self-determination. This framing emphasizes ethical injury over strategic miscalculation and presents Hungary less as an active participant in shaping its fate than as a passive object of Western decision-making. In the contemporary period, this interpretive framework gained renewed political relevance under a right-wing government whose agenda draws heavily on themes of national sovereignty, historical injustice, and moral restoration. Within the governing intellectual milieu, Trianon functions as a key symbolic reference point that informs critiques of Western liberalism and reinforces narratives of national victimhood and resilience.



Figure 2 *No! No! Never!: Irredentist propaganda poster from the interwar period. The adversarial foreign nations of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs are depicted as allegorical humans preying on the mutilated Hungary*

Source: *https://ma7.sk/kozelet/aktualis/a-nemzeti-osszetartozas-napja#lg=1&slide=0*

Institutionalization in Memory Culture

The memory of Trianon has been deeply institutionalized within Hungarian public culture. School textbooks, public monuments, memorial statues, and national commemorations consistently reproduce the event as a core reference point of national identity. Annual remembrance days and symbolic representations, such as maps depicting pre-Trianon Hungary, reinforce a sense of historical continuity between territorial loss and present-day collective self-understanding.

The memory of Trianon has been deeply institutionalized within Hungarian public culture through a dense network of educational, commemorative, and symbolic practices. This institutionalization is further reinforced by dedicated sites of memory, such as the Trianon Museum in Várpalota[37] and the Memorial of National Cohesion *(A Nemzeti Összetartozás Emlékhelye)* in Budapest,[38] which frame the treaty as a lasting national rupture rather than a closed historical episode. In addition, since 2010, the establishment of the National Cohesion Day *(Nemzeti Összetartozás Napja)* as an official remembrance day has engraved the trauma in the state calendar. Together with recurring symbolic representations, these practices create a sense of historical continuity. At the same time, this does not imply that Trianon is consciously invoked in the daily thinking of most Hungarians. Rather, its significance lies in its latent presence. It functions as a background framework that shapes broader attitudes towards sovereignty, injustice, and relations with external powers. Scholars of Hungarian memory politics have noted[39] that Trianon operates less as a constantly articulated grievance and more as a taken-for-granted interpretive horizon through which political claims and worldviews acquire meaning. Through its institutionalization in education, commemorative practices, and political symbolism, the trauma narrative is transmitted across generations. This ensures its continued relevance not through constant repetition, but through its capacity to structure public perceptions and political reasoning in subtle yet enduring ways.

Political Rhetoric of the Eastern Opening

Since 2010, the Hungarian political elite has increasingly employed historical references within a broader critical discourse towards the West. While the trauma of Trianon is not a direct or explicit foundation of the government's Eastern Opening policy, it forms part of the symbolic background that lends resonance and credibility to anti-Western rhetoric in contemporary political debate. In speeches and public statements, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has contrasted what he describes as the Western civilization declining with the rise of new Eastern centers of power. He has argued that Hungary must pursue pragmatic and sovereignty-oriented relations beyond the traditional Western framework. This rhetoric has been reinforced by influential intellectual figures close to the government, such as Balázs Orbán[40] and Mária Schmidt,[41] who frame Western liberalism as morally exhausted and culturally alien to Hungarian traditions. Within this discourse, the East is presented not merely as an economic opportunity but as a civilizational alternative to Western dominance.

37 Trianon Museum website.
38 Trianon100.
39 Gyurgyák 2007, 315–328; Todorova (ed.) 2010; Brubaker et al. 2011, 134.
40 Orbán 2022.
41 Schmidt 2020; Schmidt 2019.

Civilizational Rhetoric and Foreign Policy Orientation

In contemporary foreign policy discourse, Hungarian leaders invoke historical trauma narratives to justify closer ties with non-Western powers, especially those positioned as challengers to Western dominance. Although these partnerships are often presented in pragmatic economic or strategic terms, they are also underpinned by a broader symbolic logic. China, for instance, is depicted as a civilizational power that values sovereignty, national development, and resistance to external interference. Hungary's engagement with China is therefore framed not as a rejection of Europe, but as an exercise of national autonomy shaped by historical experience. The trauma narrative provides a conceptual frame that renders these partnerships both understandable and historically grounded.

In his 2014 Tusnádfürdő speech, a widely cited and influential address, Viktor Orbán challenged[42] the universal authority of Western liberal democracy, declaring that "systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful." By naming China, Russia, and India as successful non-liberal models, Orbán created a discursive space in which skepticism towards Western norms is legitimized and partnerships with non-Western powers become historically grounded. Although Trianon is not named explicitly, the speech resonates with the long-standing Hungarian experience of externally imposed moral authority, thereby lending symbolic credibility to the Eastern Opening. As the speech established this discursive space and skepticism towards Western norms became legitimized, alternative global partnerships, including with China, can be conceived as reasonable and historically grounded. This demonstrates how trauma narratives operate indirectly, shaping the symbolic environment that guides foreign policy interpretation.

In his 2024 speech inaugurating the Budapest Eurasia Forum, Orbán emphasized[43] Hungary's need to situate itself in a shifting global order, highlighting the decline of Western dominance and the rise of Eastern powers. He framed Hungary's engagement with Asia as forward-looking, strategically autonomous, and compatible with national interests. This rhetoric situates Hungary within a broader civilizational narrative that contrasts Western inefficacy with the dynamism of the East. Within the trauma-informed interpretive framework, the speech illustrates how historical memory subtly shapes contemporary foreign policy. The East is not idealized, but it represents a space in which Hungary's sovereignty and agency are less constrained by Western moral or political authority.

CONCLUSION

This study compared Hungarian and Chinese trauma narratives through a hermeneutic lens. The aim was not to demonstrate historical equivalence between the Treaty of Trianon and the Century of Humiliation, but to identify structural similarities in how these experiences are interpreted and mobilized in political discourse. By shifting attention from historical events themselves to their meaning-making processes, the analysis has shown how distinct historical trajectories can generate comparable interpretive frameworks that shape contemporary political orientations.

[42] Orbán 2014.

[43] Orbán 2024.

A central similarity exists in the construction of a collective victim identity. It is important to acknowledge that the two traumas differ structurally. China's Century of Humiliation arose from external imperialist interventions and semi-colonial dependence, whereas Trianon resulted from the dissolution of a multi-ethnic Habsburg state through great-power diplomacy. The parallel is therefore primarily discursive: both are framed as externally imposed wounds inflicted by "the West." In this study, "the West" is understood not as a monolithic geographical entity but as a symbolic complex, encompassing liberal modernity, the post-1945 institutional order (EU/NATO), and normative claims to universalism that both narratives portray as historically insensitive to national sovereignty. In both Hungary and China, national history is narrated through the experience of externally imposed injustice. Trianon is presented in Hungarian discourse as an unjust dismemberment carried out by Western victors, while Chinese narratives portray the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a prolonged period of humiliation inflicted by imperial powers. In neither case are these experiences confined to the past. They are treated as formative traumas that continue to define national identity. Suffering is thus transformed into a moral resource that legitimizes political claims and strengthens internal cohesion.

This victim-centered self-understanding feeds into a shared skepticism towards the West. In both narratives, Western powers are assigned moral responsibility for historical suffering, which shapes how contemporary Western criticism, norms, or institutional pressures are perceived. Rather than being interpreted as neutral or universal, Western influence is often viewed as hypocritical, insensitive, or self-serving. Despite the vast differences between Hungary and China in terms of size, power, and global position, their trauma narratives produce a similar form of moral mistrust towards Western authority.

These attitudes are further reinforced by civilizational framing. Both political discourses emphasize the existence of a distinct civilizational identity that stands apart from Western modernity. In China, official rhetoric stresses the continuity of Chinese civilization and its unique developmental path, often articulated through references to Chinese characteristics. In Hungary, political discourse, particularly under Viktor Orbán, emphasizes Central Europe's specific historical experience and cultural difference from the Western liberal core. In both cases, political disagreement with the West is elevated into a broader moral and cultural distinction.

This shared interpretive structure helps explain Hungary's distinctive position within the European Union regarding China. While EU institutions increasingly frame China as a strategic rival or systemic challenge, Hungary has consistently resisted this language. Instead, Hungarian government discourse emphasizes sovereignty, pragmatism, and mutual respect. When viewed through the lens of trauma narratives, Hungary's approach to China appears shaped by a perceived historical affinity. Both nations are understood as having experienced domination or marginalization within a Western-centered international order.

This paper has demonstrated that cultural trauma narratives play an important role in shaping foreign policy orientations. By examining how collective memories of suffering are constructed and interpreted, the analysis highlights the moral and cultural dimensions that influence state behavior. In the Hungarian case, this helps explain why foreign policy positions towards China may diverge from broader alliance expectations within the European Union.

Future research could extend this comparative and hermeneutic approach to other cases in which historical trauma shapes political orientation. Examining countries such as Russia or Serbia through the lens of cultural trauma could reveal additional parallels in how

collective memory shapes foreign policy and further deepens our understanding of the relationship among history, identity, and international relations.

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