

*Chinese soft power in Hungary in the light of Sino-Hungarian cultural
and educational relations*

Thesis

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I. Research Background and Significance

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Hungary was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the Beijing government. Cultural and educational cooperation between the two countries began almost immediately. The intensity of the cooperation has changed steadily over the more than seventy years since then, and there has been, and continues to be, extremely close cooperation between the two countries in the fields of culture and education.

The dissertation tries to explore the development of Chinese cultural and educational exchange programs after the establishment of Sino-Hungarian diplomatic relations, and to examine the formation and sources of Chinese soft power in Hungary. Given the historical ups and downs of China-Hungary relations and the rapid development of bilateral relations in recent years, the historical dimension of bilateral relations between the two countries is the starting point for analysis. In this dissertation, some representative historical periods are selected from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the present day that show the two peaks and their continuation during the Cold War and multipolarizing world order, and thus examine and evaluate China's soft power sources.

The reason why I chose China and Hungary to research in the case study is complex. Both countries have specific characteristics that may provide additional results in the present research. Hungary is unique in its experience of changing its political system. The change of regime drastically rewrote the trend and pace of development of Sino-Hungarian relations. The change of regime itself, and the period before and after it, influenced the development of Sino-Hungarian bilateral relations. Another subject of the case study is China. There is mistrust between China and the

Western world for political reasons. In the shadow of “Chinese threat theory,” it is very important for China to strengthen its soft power. In order to gain the trust of other countries, China is constantly taking steps to develop its soft power. For the reasons above, I am convinced that studying China-Hungary relations from a historical perspective is a good choice.

As Joseph Nye noted in his study, soft power is easier to experience than to define or measure (Nye, 2014, p. 3), so we need to rely on a tangible indicator to measure soft power. I chose Sino-Hungarian cultural and educational relations as a research tool because of the close connection between “soft power” and “cultural and educational relations”. Successfully building a country’s soft power in another country can increase the willingness for cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries, for both formal and civil exchanges. Of course, the opposite is true. The growth of the strength and breadth in term of the spectrum of cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries could theoretically contribute to an increase in soft power of the two countries, even if it is only a certain degree of growth. Although the relationship between soft power and cultural diplomacy is not necessarily positive correlation, the intensity of cultural exchanges based on mutual respect rather than hegemony can be used as an important indicator to measure soft power.

This research has very important practical significance. From a theoretical point of view, bilateral cultural and educational relations are an important part of international relations, which interact closely with the bilateral system as a whole and its other elements. Cultural and educational relations not only reflect the quality of political and economic relations, but also enhance these qualities; In practical terms, China is one of the most important partners in Asia for Hungary and Hungary is one of the most important partners in the Central and Eastern Europe for China. From this perspective, Sino-Hungarian relations are very important.

This dissertation brings several new results from a theoretical point of view. There are limitations if we only use Western theories and perspectives to explain China's issues. Therefore, we need to supplement and improve Western theories. Some Chinese scholars believe that since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the country’s view of international relations has been all based on the principle of classical realism. These scholars believe that China has gone through several painful historical events, such as foreign repression, semi-colonization, the expulsion of invaders after a long struggle, and a series of civil wars. These experiences have contributed to a

transformation of China's perception, which has shifted from a unified worldview to a state-centred worldview, where the survival of the country is the primary position (Pan, 2013, p. 87). We cannot deny that the survival of a nation is the primary pursuit, but we must also recognize that, unlike many Western countries, China's approach to soft power has deeper historical roots. China's uniqueness stems from its idea of a world system influenced by Confucianism and has deeply rooted the thinking and behaviour of the Chinese people. This mindset not only influences the definition of China's foreign policy directive, but also plays a crucial role in China's overseas soft power design and implementation. This will be much more evident in the current multipolar world structure than in the bipolar world order.

Even though the cultural and educational exchange is an important part of the relationship between the People's Republic of China and Hungary, no analysis or study has been conducted that comprehensively examined this issue. Therefore, this topic is worth discussing.

II. Methodology

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Hungary in 1949, the Sino-Hungarian relations have gone through different historical periods, and each period has its own characteristics. Cultural relations between the two countries, influenced by the political environment of different periods, also went through ups and downs. Therefore, the study of cultural relations cannot be separated from the historical environment.

Many people believe that research in the explanatory and historical evaluation types is relatively rare and not considered important in the disciplines of political science. It is indisputable that the status quo of international relations is inseparable from history. On this issue, I agree with Stephen Van Evera, professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who pointed out that in political science, people tend to prefer creating and testing theories rather than the application of the theory. However, this is a misleading bias. Without research explaining history, history will never be understood. Without research evaluating history, we cannot learn from the past, and will not be able to solve current and future problems. Therefore, the mission of politics should also include the task of historical interpretation, rather than leaving the task entirely to historians (Van Evera, 2014, p. 89). To do this, we need to

remove the narrow barriers between disciplines. In addition to creating and testing the theory, equal importance should be placed on solving policy problems, answering historical questions, and reviewing literatures. Based on all this, my dissertation includes both historical interpretation and evaluation, reviews on the history of Sino-Hungarian relations and answers to the questions that arise from a historical point of view using an archival literature review and in-depth interviews. The aim of the dissertation is to test the theory of soft power through case studies.

There are two basic methods in the field of political science research for testing theories: the experimental method and the observational method. There are two types of observation tests: a statistical method and a case study. Therefore, there are three basic test methods: experimental method, observational method based on large-scale analysis, and observational method with case analysis. Both observation methods are based on large amounts of analysis and the one based on case studies is a basic research method. Each has its own advantages and disadvantages. In terms of operability and “tracking of event processes,” the case study method can better achieve the goal of this dissertation. Therefore, the dissertation analyses and studies Sino-Hungarian cultural relations starting from 1949 as a single case. From this, I tested and supplemented the theory of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye.

The biggest challenge in my research is how to measure the strength of soft power. As Nye wrote, power is like love, which is easier to experience than to define or to measure and it is based more on the spontaneous understanding of recipients (Nye, 2014, p. 3). It has a diffusion effect, and has general, rather than concrete and visible, results. From the perspective of methodology, there are two main research methods which are generally used in scientific studies on soft power. One is the traditional case study method and the other is a statistically based quantitative research method. In recent years, there have been researchers who have applied the statistical research method to study soft power. In their papers, index system and statistical evaluation models are set to measure the intensity of soft power, such as population, territory, natural resources, economic-military strength, social stability, cultural investment, cultural institutions, cultural products, scientific technology talent, high-tech enterprises number, etc. The advantage of quantitative research is that it makes soft power more specific, measurable, and predictable. However, there are issues when valuing power and resources as equal which create a paradox where it looks powerful but lacks attractiveness.

In my dissertation, I chose Sino-Hungarian cultural and educational relations as a

research tool to make the measurement of soft power tangible. However, when trying to measure the number and frequency of cultural exchanges in the history of Hungary and China, and do quantitative research based on this, it is easy to misinterpret the soft power changes behind cultural exchanges. The relationship between soft power and cultural diplomacy does not necessarily have positive correlation, which means strengthening cultural diplomacy does not necessarily lead to a faster growing of soft power. The promotion of soft power must be based on values recognized by others, so cultural hegemony disguised by the mask of cultural promotion and arrogance will not contribute to the promotion of soft power

Another method to analyse soft power is case study. In his book "*Soft Power*," Joseph S. Nye take the United States, the former Soviet Union, Europe, Asia and NGOs as examples to explain where soft power comes from, how to use and enforce it, and how soft power affects foreign policy. Given the shortcomings of the statistical research method and the different size and national strength of China and Hungary, the dissertation did not produce a statistical model, but to choose case study method with statistical data. Regarding the topic of discussion, my dissertation does not conduct a statistical study on all data on cultural and educational exchanges between China and Hungary but pays more attention to the dynamics of cultural and educational exchanges. I examine the forces driving educational and cultural exchanges between China and Hungary in different historical periods and how exchanges and interactions take place between the two countries, what are the trends, and what has an impact on promoting China's soft power. Nevertheless, statistics are essential as they can provide very good support.

Besides the case study, I also use one of the traditional research methods in international political science: the level of analysis. Already in the 1950s, Kenneth N. Waltz had already analysed the causes of the outbreak of international wars from the perspective of levels (international system level, state level, individual level). Later, David J. Singer also used this method to study international issues. Singer highlighted two levels: the level of the international system and the level of the state (Singer, 1961, p. 77-92). In the dissertation I use the Singer's approach, analysing the Sino-Hungarian cultural and educational relations at the international system level and national level.

This dissertation focuses on the period from the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Hungary to the present day, because during this 70-year period the political system of the world has undergone great changes. Changes in the

world order and the international situation have had a major impact on cultural and educational relations between China and Hungary.

During my research, the specific methods I used are as follows:

- 1) Collection of archived materials.
- 2) Collection of relevant documents and historical materials.
- 3) In-depth interviews with interviewees.
- 4) Analysis of statistics relevant to the research topic.

It needs to be explained that I use mainly Hungarian archival materials because the dissertation focuses on the development of a Chinese soft power in Hungary, the records of Hungarian archives can show us how the Hungarian side of thought on China. During the research, the reliability of the sources is important. Therefore, in addition to the archival materials, I also collected and analysed first-hand materials and government documents. I also conducted in-depth interviews with both Hungarian and Chinese witnesses of history, including sinologists, diplomats, researchers, businessman, and scholarship recipients. I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of ten interviewees, including three young Chinese experts who are well acquainted with the development of today's Sino-Hungarian relations; and seven older persons who were active in the 1950s-60s. The ten interviewees worked mainly in the political, economic-commercial, cultural-educational fields and devoted their lives to the development of Sino-Hungarian relations. They offered a number of valuable pieces of information which can be an important supplement to the existing data.

III. Scientific results of the dissertation

The hypothesis of the dissertation is related to the theory of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye. The main hypothesis of my research:

China's own political values and philosophies are the main guidelines considering soft power building in Hungary.

Sub-hypothesis 1: In the bipolar world, Chinese political values played a crucial role in building China's soft power in Hungary.

In the chapter of the case studies, I studied the cultural and educational relations

between China and Hungary since the founding of the People's Republic of China on the basis of valuable historical documents of the Hungarian National Archives and interviews with witnesses of the history of Sino-Hungarian relations. I came to the conclusion that in the bipolar world order, the Sino-Hungarian cultural and educational exchange was a clear political tool for shaping bilateral political relations. Cultural diplomacy can be assessed as a direct and mechanical response to specific political situations. Foreign and domestic policy greatly influenced the cultural and educational exchanges between China and Hungary at the time. The case study provides good evidence for the theory proposed by Nye, according to whom similar or common political values, which can increase the attraction of the two countries to each other, and their willingness to exchange culturally and educationally, can be considered as an important source of soft power

Sub-hypothesis 2: In the multipolar world order, Chinese traditional values and philosophies play an increasingly important role in building China's soft power in Hungary.

To prove the second sub-hypothesis, I chose the period from 2003 to 2019 as the main time interval involved in the research, from the announcement of the Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative to the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus epidemic. The “Belt and Road” initiative, which aims to provide Chinese solutions to global governance, has not led to the strengthening of “China Threat Theory”, but has received a positive response from many countries. In practice, this represents a significant step forward in term of China's soft power, as China, in addition to developing its own traditional philosophy of soft power based on the magic of Eastern culture, has sought to strengthen national soft power through cooperation initiatives and mutually beneficial international cooperation, while trying to avoid “Chinese threat theory” in other countries. Theoretically, China’s attempt to expand the three sources of soft power proposed by Nye with national soft power, while avoiding a way to develop soft power based on mere economic power, as some researchers have suggested. Creating opportunities for mutually beneficial international cooperation can be seen as a new source of Chinese national soft power. In addition, this dissertation discusses the issue of risk and sustainability of national soft power resources based on potential future economic cooperation opportunities. After the outbreak of COVID-19, China has

chosen a relatively restrained and implicit, slightly inward path to build its soft power, which also reflects the traditional Chinese mindset. In the multipolarization world, as China's national power grows, the Asian country's cultural diplomatic policy is still struggling to apply the approach of modern international relations while maintaining its own traditional philosophy.

Through the observation and analysis of historical events, I examined and supplemented the theory of soft power proposed by Joseph Nye. This dissertation has founded new results and suggests further to the theory of soft power, for which I have drawn the following conclusions from a critical research:

1. In his book *Soft Power*, Nye did not include the economy in the category of soft power. In my research, however, agrees the economy cannot be a hard force, but be a source of soft power in two ways: the economic results achieved, if not a threat to other countries, and potential gains. In my dissertation, I came to the conclusion through the case study that in the shadow of "China's threat", economic performance alone cannot increase China's soft power, but after the announcement of the "Belt and Road" initiative, potential benefits could be attractive to other countries. These two factors, the economic results achieved and potential gains, combined together to become a new source of China's soft power.

2. In his new book published in 2015, Nye continued to retain the three sources of soft power: culture, political values, foreign policy. Despite not officially including the economy in the soft power category, he pointed out in the chapter of the "Rise of China" that the economic model of "Chinese market Leninism" is a soft power in some authoritarian countries, but it has the opposite effect in many democracies. This statement is untrue because there is no "market Leninism" in China as an economic model, but a so-called "socialist market economy system with Chinese characteristics". Practically, the Chinese economic system has no followers in the world, so we cannot say that the Chinese economic system itself would be attractive to other countries. I believe that when examining the sources of soft power, a distinction must be made between the concepts of economic performance and the economic system. Regarding authoritarian and democratic countries, in my dissertation I proved through a case study that Hungary, as a democratic country, has had a close relationship with China for the last ten years, especially after the announcement of the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative. This phenomenon fully demonstrates that the Chinese economy can gain soft power even in a democratic country.

3. In Nye's research, soft power and the theories based on it are based on a Western approach and value system, ignoring their different interpretations between different cultures and values. Nye believes that universal values exist, and when there are universal values in the culture of a country, then the parties of the country can build a kind of attractive and responsible relationship, increasing the country's chances of achieving its needs. This is a type of thinking based on Western philosophy and is clearly contrary to Eastern philosophy. China is the country with the oldest civilization in the world: over thousands of years of development, it has developed unique languages and writing, way of life, philosophical thinking, and values that are vastly different from those of Western civilizations. Therefore, when China comes into contact with another country, it always tries to emphasize that "we are different but strive for harmony" and considers that universal values do not exist. From the perspective of diplomatic practice, achieving mutually beneficial results and economic cooperation for China is the right way to end conflict or deepen relations between the two countries. As a result, China classifies economic assets in the category of soft power rather than hard power. In summary, I believe that the understanding of the concepts also needs to synthesize the various values between East and West. There are limitations to recognizing the world and observing specific issues and phenomena only from a Western perspective.

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