


5-2016

### The Chinese Culture and Hungary

Attila Kasznár  
*University of Miskolc*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>

 Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Kasznár, Attila (2016) "The Chinese Culture and Hungary," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 36 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol36/iss3/3>

This Article, Exploration, or Report is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolf@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolf@georgefox.edu).

# THE CHINESE CULTURE AND HUNGARY

By Attila Kasznár

Attila Kasznar holds the position of assistant lecturer at the Political Institute of the University of Miskolc in Hungary, and he is the editor of the Hungarian security policy periodical, *Terror & Elhárítás* (Terror & Protection). He received his Doctorate of Philosophy from the University of Pécs. His research interests include the philosophical religious system relations with the Chinese government, the Chinese minority in Hungary, and the terrorism and security policy in Eastern Asia.

## Introduction

The People's Republic of China has undoubtedly by now become one of the leading economic powers of the world. The performance of the Chinese industry is a determining factor anywhere in the world, and it will become more and more relevant for the national economies as well as in global processes. In global politics however, Beijing—despite membership in the UN Security Council—is still considered “only” a regional power. Chinese leadership does everything it can so that their country would not be looked upon as a global power because they can greatly benefit from this situation. Its capability to exert influence is growing and becoming significant, so it can be disregarded less and less. The Chinese tactic is clear: they do not wish to be a military or political player, but rather they want to play a primarily economic role. The People's Republic of China demands more and more a place in the global economic institutional system that corresponds to its size and its financial and economic weight. The global economic and financial crisis that started in 2008 significantly revalues China's international financial and economic role and influence. Beijing consciously uses its increased weight to its benefit and urges the reform of the major world economic organizations and the global financial system. While the developed western

civilization fights for the sustainability or even the mere survival of its economy, Chinese development only lost a bit of its impetus.

China has become an unavoidable factor in international processes primarily due to its economic potential; it is a kind of player that Hungary, Hungarian scientists, researchers, politicians and economic experts cannot just blindly pass by. China has become a vital interest of Hungary to benefit as much as possible from the Chinese participation in the processes of globalization. Whether Hungary will be a winner or a loser of the Chinese success depends mostly on its ability to cooperate. In order for Hungary to be successful in overcoming obstacles, it is important to understand the sociological and cultural driving forces of the ongoing Chinese processes. Getting to know, and then understanding and accepting, could be the key that can lead us to benefit from the economic cooperation with the People's Republic of China that could bring about extraordinary economic advantages to Hungary.

In Hungary too, we need to forget the long standing traditional image of China and build a new one. For this, however, it is necessary to really know that world very well, a world that we had considered before as underdeveloped. It is vital for us to really know China that merges thousands of years of traditions with the achievements of the modern world.

### **The Chinese Migrants**

Nevertheless, western people still consider China as an exotic country in the East, not realizing that in the past 25-30 years, this Asian country has become part of our everyday lives. Chinese communities expand around the world together with Chinese economic expansion, and they organize and live their lives there in line with their own social traditions unknown to western culture. The structure and operation of Chinese communities in the western world can be observed and followed very well through the so-called Chinatowns.

The Chinatowns, or Chinese districts, are usually those areas of a metropolis where

most of the Chinese migrants make up a more or less united community, usually following their own traditions and making up an almost independent economic unit, and, like it or not, often living according to their own common law rules and by this, shaping their everyday lives as they live side by side with the majority population.

However, such centers of migrants did not evolve in Hungary due to the special nature of the Chinese migration processes here. Research regarding the Chinese communities in Hungary, Chinese culture and social organization is still limited to a narrow scope. Unfortunately, it seems that there is not enough interest in Hungary doing research on the significant number of Chinese migrants living here, even though it is more and more evident that it would be necessary to take this issue seriously.

The first question to be examined is the date from which we can actually speak of Chinese culture in Hungary. The Chinese community in Hungary evolved in parallel to the process of changing the system in the country. Hungary waived visa requirement for Chinese tourists in 1988, and as a result, masses of “*tourist-businessmen*” coming from the Far East flooded Hungary. The economic vacuum created by the change in the system was especially attractive to them. The merchants selling cheap products on the so-called “Polish markets” that were popular in the 1980s finished their activities and closed down. Their places were taken by the Chinese, but unlike the Polish, they arrived in masses to stay in Hungary; they did not plan to return to their country after having sold their products, but instead, they planned to settle here—or travel on to the west—in hopes of a better economic environment. Only a small fraction of the migrants were searching for asylum after the June 4, 1989 incidents on Tiananmen Square and the following persecutions. The Chinese picked Hungary from among countries of the Central and East European block for their interest, so much so that the “number of Chinese entering Hungary leapt from practically zero in the mid-1980s to

11,621 in 1990 and to 27,330 in 1991.”<sup>1</sup> But their real numbers most probably well above the ones that the mentioned survey indicates. Researchers “usually estimate the peak Chinese presence in Hungary in this period to over 40,000, but the number of those who had come and gone could have been even higher than that.”<sup>2</sup> A lot of the Chinese visiting Hungary travelled—mostly illegally. Unfortunately it may be, we do not know the exact the number of Chinese staying in Hungary, so we can only estimate it. Different surveys put the number of Chinese migrants in Hungary between 10,000 and 22,000. Therefore, based on the above, we can say that in the past twenty years, a large community evolved in Hungary that is culturally and totally alien to the majority society as well as to the other national minorities living here. In addition, this minority is the size of a small town, can be considered the third largest minority if we accept the highest estimate, or in case of the lowest estimate, the fifth. Nevertheless, the Chinese community in Hungary is not considered officially a minority.

It is evident that Hungary cannot afford not to know the details of the culture of one of the most significant of its minorities especially if such a minority comes from one of the major nations that shape global politics and world economy.

## Getting to Know

Getting to know China is extremely important because Hungary—just as most states—is becoming more and more dependent on the Chinese economy. It is vital for Hungary to have a tight, good and if possible friendly relationship with China. But this is not possible if we know nothing of the Chinese; it is important to get to know them as thoroughly as possible.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nyíri Pál. “Új ázsiai migráció Kelet-Európába: a magyarországi Kínaiak.” [Pál Nyíri. “New Asian Migration in Eastern-Europe: Chinese in Hungary”] in: Kováts Nóra - Szarka László (szerk.): *Tér és terep. Tanulmányok az etnicitás és az identitás kérdésköréből III.* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003), 163.

<sup>2</sup> Polonyi Péter. “A magyarországi kínai kolónia problémáiról.” [Péter Polonyi: About the Problems of Chinese Colony in Hungary] in: Inotai András – Juhász Ottó (szerk): *Kína: Realitás és esély.* Budapest: MTA Világgazdasági Kutatóintézet. 2008). 332.

Therefore, as stated before, it is vital to get to know the Chinese, but the question is: what do we, Hungarians know at all about Chinese culture? The answer is depressing—almost nothing. This, of course, is understandable to some extent because we do not even know how many migrants of Chinese descent live in Hungary. Actually, they are here, they live here next to us, with us, yet we do not know them, their traditions and their values. The Hungarian people are not known for being an extremely open-minded and inclusive nation. To the contrary, Hungary is one of the most rejecting and excluding nations in Europe regarding immigrants. As a result, while Hungarians do accept that there are people coming from a far corner of Asia that live amongst them, who to them, look strange and very much alike, and speak a funny language, , they do not wish to understand them, and due to their European conditioning, they cannot understand them. This is because our western mentality, and mostly the basis of our philosophical and political-philosophical contemplations, can be traced back to the thesis of “the political traditions of our civilization are determined by the logical and empirical primacy of individuality.”<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, our starting point of any analysis, approach and assessment is individual freedom. Societies are assessed in the frame of reference of the success and the amount of opportunities of the individual, ultimately of the completeness of individual liberties. Because of our understanding of the individual who is the center of our thoughts, we are unable to detach ourselves from the fulfilment of individual desire for freedom which has been weighing on us as a guiding principle for centuries. The eastern and especially the far-eastern world is made up of nations that had gone through a totally different cultural evolution process and their basic intellectual needs are very far from the fullest possible individual freedom and independence. This different outlook upon the world is the reason why the eastern—thus Chinese—concept of life, attitude to power, to leadership, to him/herself and to the world at large, are so difficult to understand with a

---

<sup>3</sup> Balázs Zoltán. *A politikai közösség*. [Zoltán Balázs: The Political Community] (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2003), 27.

western mentality. This outlook on the world of the Chinese that is so alien to a European individual is the reason why we look upon their culture from a distance, very carefully, and often with not enough interest.

If you ask a person on the street about Chinese culture, the answer very often reveals almost total ignorance; if we are lucky, the concept of *feng-shui*, or some other concepts related to the culture of motion might be familiar to some. We have little chance to come across a Hungarian who knows the name of a Chinese poet, author or composer, even though China is not home only to cheap clothing, but also of the arts. Nevertheless, people know very little of all this in Hungary.

*Feng-shui* is extremely popular nowadays in Europe and in the United States. With our hurried lifestyle, when we have no time to pay attention to our relationship and harmony with nature, more and more people turn to the balance creating system of eastern philosophy to fill the little time they spend in their homes. The outcome, however, in most cases is mixed. You cannot create balance just in a small segment of your life if the rest—and through this, the whole—is full of disharmony. Like it or not, our modern, hurried high-tech world is like this. Nevertheless, the presence of *feng-shui* in the western—including Hungarian—culture is still positive. It can give a slice of tranquility to those who try to apply such rules.

The spreading of the Chinese culture of motion—the different styles of martial arts—is a real success story in western societies. Ever since Bruce Lee showed martial arts in his films in a way that suited western tastes, they conquered the world. All kinds of institutions teaching martial arts open one after another. Most of these *kung fu* schools, however, offer not only physical exercise and training, but they put more and more emphasis on the mental preparation of those enrolled. This is done because the traditional Chinese universalist approach—as mentioned above—considers the balance of the different factors, components, and parts as the most important thing. This means that the body can be trained to become a

perfect weapon only if the soul and the mind are also conditioned the right way. The mental training provided by martial art schools/centers is definitely the most significant context in which Chinese culture is transmitted.

Another cultural dimension of Chinese origins well-known in the world—perhaps not that well-known in Hungary—needs to be mentioned, which is Chinese medicine. Traditional Chinese medicine identifies three principles of life: breath (*chi*), life essence or body (*ching*), and mind (*seng*). The body is healthy only if the three principles of life are in balance, and as soon as the balance is upset, illnesses and diseases set in. Why is it important for us to know the special features of Chinese medicine? It is because this is an incredibly important segment of Chinese culture.

Traditional Chinese medicine is based on Taoism. The manifestation of Taoist mysticism is the eternal search for immortality. But while western cultures can imagine immortality only in the spiritual world, the Tao's followers can do so in spirit and in body, which leads directly to the evolvment of alchemy, and that in turn, to medicine. Alchemy and medicine are extremely important. Despite all the victims of alchemy and its magical potions, the Chinese have done something insurmountable in holistic medicine.

### **Official and Non-official Cultural Institutions and Relationships**

The Agreement on Cultural, Scientific and Educational Cooperation between the governments of Hungary and the People's Republic of China was signed on June 17, 1987,<sup>4</sup> and every two to three years, work plans on education and cultural cooperation between ministries are signed for practical implementation. There are a number of similarities in the cultures of the two countries that indicate common Asian roots. The Chinese consider the same order of family and given names as an outstanding sign, just as the same order of

---

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kulkepviselet/CN/hu/Bilateralis/Kina/Oktatasi\\_kapcsolatok/oktatasi\\_kapcsolatok.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kulkepviselet/CN/hu/Bilateralis/Kina/Oktatasi_kapcsolatok/oktatasi_kapcsolatok.htm) (downloaded: 26.09.2010).



writing dates: the year, month and day format.

Approximately some 20 sister cities relations have been established between the two countries. But let us see the main institutions that are responsible in Hungary for disseminating Asian culture.

The most important institution in Hungary that promotes China is the Confucius Institution within the Eötvös Loránd University. According to the information on the home page of the Institution “the ELTE Confucius Institution is the only official national cultural institution of China in Hungary. Our purpose is to make the Chinese language and culture available to as many people as possible.”<sup>5</sup> The Chinese Government created the first Confucius Institution in Tashkent not long ago in 2004, and then a small success story developed as such organizations popped up one after another around the world. By the end of 2009, there were altogether 282 institutions with this name functioning around the world. The Institution in Hungary offers by now all kinds of Chinese cultural event every week.

The main activities of the Confucius Institution include the following: different levels of language courses for a fee and also out of office courses. For students participating in higher education, they offer free courses in Chinese language. For secondary school students, they offer free language courses in the schools themselves. For those wishing to pass a state examination in the Chinese language, there are preparatory courses offered and exams organized. They offer students in secondary and higher education courses to expand their general knowledge on China. There are cultural presentations all the time for the public if they are interested in this Asian country. There are other types of China-related events. They publish and maintain teaching materials for the Chinese language. They also run a public library.

The Institution organizes a presentation every month where invited experts of certain

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.konfuciuszintezet.hu> (downloaded: 06.11.2010).

fields offer their knowledge on general Chinese cultural issues. In Hungary today, the Confucius Institution can be considered institution for transmitting Chinese culture.

### **Other Institutions of Chinese Culture**

As mentioned before, it is typical of organizations teaching martial arts and promoting the culture of motion that they also play a role in promoting the philosophy and the culture behind them. This is true for the institutions in Hungary as well.

Of these organizations, let us highlight the Chinese Cultural and Art Centre. The institution was created as a non-profit organization of public use in 1995. The purpose of founding such institution was to “teach and practice the innermost and authentic kung fu as taught by the grand master Zhang Er Yu.”<sup>6</sup>

The Cultural Centre continuously adds new activities and attaches more importance to spreading Chinese culture in Hungary. They organize presentations on the different Chinese religions—Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism—and on Chinese fine arts and architecture. They especially promote Chinese tea culture. They have professional and friendly relationship with similar institutions in China, Australia, Russia, France, Germany, the UK, the US, Canada, and Austria and a number of other countries.

Another interesting civilian initiative is the South China Cultural Association established in August 2010. The aim of the organization is “to provide organized frameworks for our Friendship Society that is interested in South-Chinese culture and that was created spontaneously in 2006. The members of our Society are interested first of all in Chinese calligraphy, tea culture, religious traditions, architecture, culture of motion, the lion-dance, drumming, and the Chinese language. We practice, study and research the unique values and

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.kinainfo.hu/index.php?mid=79> (downloaded: 06.11.2010).

folk traditions of South-Chinese culture as a hobby.”<sup>7</sup>

The mentioned officially and privately initiated cultural institutions and communities play an invaluable role. It is important to support them so that Hungarians could get a wider picture on the national culture of China, and through it, to understand better and accept the Chinese minority of the size of a town living in Hungary. The support to other similar organizations also seems to be justified, and possible involvement of the government in creating them and operating them is something to think about.

Efforts should be made for Chinese cultural institutions and their programs not to be Budapest centered only and to ensure that information related to China reach the people in the countryside as well.

---

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kinainegyed.hu/> (downloaded: 10.11.2010).