

WORKING PAPER

Chinese soft power in action: how Hungarian exchange students see the developing China

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Abstract

China's development in the past 40 years fundamentally changed the way the outside world looks at the Middle Kingdom. This is partially the result of conscious efforts made by the Chinese government to enhance Chinese soft power. One special form of soft power initiatives is to promote Chinese language and culture among the future elites of other countries. The most intensive way to engage foreign students in things Chinese is awarding scholarships to them. China has been using this tool very extensively in the past four decades, providing generous scholarship opportunities to students from all corners of the world. Little, however, is known about the impact of these studying opportunities and experiences on the opinion of these students on China and Chinese developments. To gain some information on how international students see the country, we conducted a pilot survey among Hungarian university and college students who had spent at least one semester at a Chinese institute of higher learning between 2012 and 2017. The paper, after outlining the background, analyses the findings of the survey, providing information on how future foreign "China hands" or decision-makers on China look at the country, and how Chinese soft power efforts on this small but potentially influential group of people could be improved.

Keywords: *China, Hungary, soft power, education, exchange students*

Foreword

China's development in the past 40 years, thanks to the Reform and Opening policy, has not only increased the economic might and political influence of the country, but also fundamentally changed the way the outside world looks at the Middle Kingdom. This is partially the result of conscious efforts made by the Chinese government to enhance Chinese soft power. These soft power initiatives target different groups of people and layers of society. One special form of these initiatives is to promote Chinese language, culture, values and way of life among the future elites of the other countries, namely, university students. The most intensive way to engage foreign students in things Chinese is awarding scholarships to them in China. China has been using this tool very extensively in the past four decades, providing generous scholarship opportunities to students all around the world. Little, however, is known about the impact of these studying opportunities and experiences on the opinion of these students on China and Chinese development. This information would be very valuable to, among others, Chinese decision-makers, as students who now study in China will be members

of the future political, business and intellectual elites of foreign countries, shaping policies and decisions regarding China in coming decades.

To gain some information on how foreign students see China, we conducted a survey among Hungarian university and college students who had spent at least one semester at a Chinese institute of higher learning between 2012 and 2017. Questions were related to the opinion of the students on life, education, study environment and perspectives in China, based on personal experiences. How do they evaluate their living conditions, the education system and the administration in China? What do they think about the future opportunities the knowledge of Chinese language brings to them? What comes to their mind when they think of China? To what degree would they like to work in China?

The paper, after introducing some basic statistics about international students in China, as well as our methodology, analyses the findings of the survey, providing information on how future “China hands” or decision-makers on China in a foreign country look at China, and how Chinese soft power efforts on this small but potentially influential group of people could be improved.

1. Studying in China

1.1. Motivation

Every year, millions of students leave their countries to spend one or more semester at a faraway university. Their motivation can be anything from trying to be alone in a new, formerly unknown situation to get competitive knowledge internationally accepted. While in the European Union or in the United States it is an old practice, for the People’s Republic of China it’s relatively new, but the tendency is that the country reaches the international level easily and rapidly.

For the question of why it is good for a student to go abroad, the answer is clear. The motivations of the other sides of the relation, i.e., the sending and the receiving countries, however, are a bit more complicated. Each country has its goals with people-to-people connections and student exchange. For example, source countries usually want their students to return and use their newly gained knowledge and skills at home. Student exchange also helps to make the relationship between two countries tighter, even if the participants of the student program stay in the host country in the long run, for example as businessmen or diplomats. Host countries obtain obvious material benefits, such as tuition fees, and they also have a chance to increase their soft power by, for example, spreading their values among foreign students.

For China, student exchange and scholarship programs can certainly be highly beneficial to increase the country’s soft power, enhance its cultural influence and spread a positive country image which generates mutual understanding and acceptance. This fits easily to China’s grand vision on Eurasia, the Belt and Road Initiative as well. There is no need to go

into details why this kind of people-to-people interaction is important. It is enough to understand that all the institutions, organisations, companies are run by human beings who must understand each other not only by a common language but also by common sense. In the case of China, language can be learnt at home, from books, with native language teachers; and nowadays, internet even makes it possible to stream classes from China. These techniques, however, can never make it possible to gain all the information somebody can absorb unconsciously when simply living inside the heart of a foreign culture. The natural usage of little gestures, the habits, ways of thinking and understanding cannot be taught by books or applications, which is a huge problem since they are all important part of how people connect, communicate and work together, and how they trust each other. This is especially important in the case of China, a country with a unique civilization.

1.2. Foreign students in China

Studying in China is a great opportunity for every foreign student, and exchange programs have much deeper effect on the relationship of two countries than the good image or attractiveness itself. Foreign students bring their own culture, language and experiences to the host country which can be very profitable in a long-term relationship. Before going into the details, first we must take a look at the big picture concerning foreign students in China.

China is a good destination for cultural and education exchange because of the formidable cultural heritage, rich pool of knowledge and experiences, high quality education and, most important of all, emerging relevance in global politics and economy. Nowadays, the quality of Chinese higher education is evident for all those students who have ever experienced it. Moreover, the university system is compatible with the ones used in Western education, credit points and marks are generally smoothly accepted by the home universities, and in many cases there are not big differences in the study plan of the same courses. The Chinese government also considers it important to maintain the quality of the education which is reflected in the financial background of it. China’s spending on education in 2017 was an enormous RMB 4,255.7 billion, which shows a year by year increase of 9.43%. Higher education takes RMB 1,110.9 billion from the whole amount and went up by 9.72% since the previous year (MOE 2018b). Education spending has continuously increased since the beginning of the Reform and Opening policy.

The number of foreign students studying in China has also been growing for four decades. In 1978, when the Reform and Opening policy was introduced, a mere 1200 foreign students studied in China. By the year 1988 this number rose to 10,497; in 1998 it reached 43,084, and the number was 223,499 in 2008 (Yang 2011: 111, see also Eszterhainé 2018: 95). The tendency has not stopped ever since, as shown in Table 1.

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
328,330	356,499	377,054	397,635	442,773	489,200

Table 1. The number of foreign students studying in China 2012–2017. Source: MOE 2013–2018.

In 2017, the last year for which data is available, a total of 489,200 international students from 204 countries and regions studied in 935 colleges, universities, research institutes and other educational institutions in 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities across China. This meant an increase of over 10% for the second consecutive year (MOE 2018a, Crace 2018). Among these students were 75,800 graduate and doctoral students, an increase of 18.62% compared to 2016. In 2017 China was the most popular destination for international students in Asia. The top 10 source countries were South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, the United States, India, Russia, Japan, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, and Laos. The number of students from ‘Belt and Road’ countries was 317,200, accounting for 64.85% of all international students in China. Most of the students, 341,900 (69.88% of the total) studied in 11 eastern municipalities and provinces. In 2017, 58,600 foreign students from 180 countries received Chinese government scholarships, accounting for 11.97% of the total. The number of self-funded students was 430,600, accounting for 88.03% of all overseas students (MOE 2018a). Unfortunately, data by country was not published, but we know that in year 2016 no less than 71,319 international students (16.11% of the total) came from Europe (MOE 2017); in 2015, the number of Europeans was 66,746 (16.79%) (MOE 2016).

1.3. Hungarian students

In Hungary there were 247,008 university and college students in 2017, including 28,677 foreign students (KSH 2018). About 250 of these majored in Chinese at one of the two institutions that have a department for Chinese studies—Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and Pázmány Péter Catholic University (PPCU)—and a few hundred others take Chinese as an optional foreign language course beside their major.

Regrettably, the number of Hungarian students studying in China or anywhere abroad is not known, due to the complete freedom of movement in EU countries and the lack of means of Hungarian authorities to collect data. The government does not compile statistics on students leaving the country, and only a few of the host countries publish information on foreign students. According to a report, admittedly based on incomplete statistics, the number of Hungarian university or college students studying abroad was over 10,000 in 2016; more than 90% of them were conducting their studies in certain Western European countries or the US, and the remaining 900 studied in other countries (Engame 2017). This latter category certainly includes China. According to our estimation, about 60 to 100 Hungarians study in China every year. We base this on the thorough knowledge of the situation at the two Chinese majors in the country (one of the authors teach at both), and on conversations with colleagues and diplomats. The Facebook group entitled „Forum of Hungarians Living in China” has more than 600 members at the time of writing, but it includes almost all people who had spent some time in China since 2012, the year when the group was established. A WeChat group for Hungarians studying in Shanghai consists of 76 people, but many members have already left the city. A similar group for Beijing has 56 members. Thus Hungarians form a very small minority of the international students studying in China, and even among the European students they do not occupy more than 0.1%. Therefore, they do not represent ‘foreign

students' or 'European students' in any way, and our work can only be considered a pilot study, but the experiences and opinions we encountered may still be of value.

2. The survey

2.1 Methodology

Since official information is unavailable and exact data cannot be acquired regarding Hungarian students studying in China, our research method was almost totally inductive. For constructing the questions, however, it was necessary to check some relevant articles, blogs and other materials to make it easier to select the focus points from the variety of potential questions. During the conduction of the survey, it was important to keep it short and focused yet give as much space as possible for the respondents to give the most appropriate answers. This is why there were only a few open questions and much more scales, although the questionnaire followed a diversified pattern of queries to keep the interest of participants alive.

The survey was conducted between the 4th and 8th of November 2017. It was filled by volunteering Hungarian students online. The language of the survey was Hungarian. We reached the students in Facebook and WeChat groups, and by group emails for students who have taken one or more of China-related classes at PPCU or ELTE in recent years. We also asked the students to spread the information in a snowball fashion. Only students who had studied in China in the past five years (2012-2017) were asked to fill the questionnaire. The survey consisted of 53 questions, some of them were of the multiple-choice type, some required short written answers, and some asked the students to give an evaluation on a scale of 1 to 10. The survey has been made according to the internationally accepted method of social sciences research techniques as standardized in the book of Earl Babbie (Babbie 2012).

The questionnaire was filled by 83 students. This is a relatively high number, given that the survey was conducted in five days, and limited to Hungarian university students who have been to China in the past five years, and to whom we had access to. This 83 people surely do not represent all the few hundreds of Hungarian students who have studied in China recently, but we think the number is high enough to provide us with some valid observations.

2.2. Respondents

A little more than half of the students who answered were from ELTE (54.2%), the largest university in Hungary with a Chinese major, and the rest were from PPCU (42.2%) and some other institutions (3.6%).

Most of the students who took part in the survey were female (78.3%), but this is natural, since the difference between the number of female and male students can also be seen in the national statistics about Hungarian higher education, and the majority of those majoring in Chinese is female.

28.9% of the students are currently studying for a BA degree, and 38.6% for an MA, while the rest finished their studies.

61.4% went to China to continue their studies after two years of Chinese language education at home, 13.3% had studied Chinese in Hungary for one year, and 13.3% for three years before getting the scholarship. A small majority had studied for more than three years or less than one before going to China. Most of the respondents, 60.2% had spent 1 year in China, while 12% went for only one semester. 14.5% arrived in China in September 2017, two months before the survey.

It is interesting to note that many students stated that if somebody wanted to get a China-related job, he or she must study in the country for at least two years (37.3%), while 34.9% thinks one year is enough.

2.3. Administration and grants

We asked some questions about the difficulty of the paperwork related to the scholarship. As for the administration process in Hungary, such as getting the required documents, visa, etc. the opinions are scattered, but a large part of the respondents say it was not very difficult (Figure 1).

83 responses

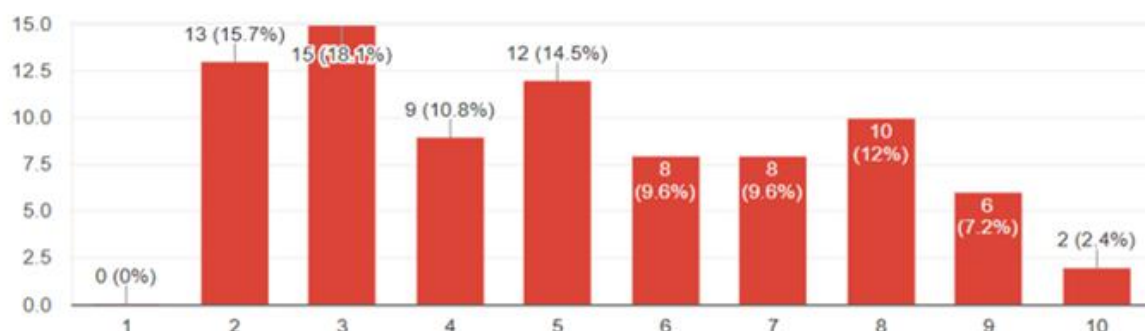


Figure 1. How difficult was the scholarship-related paperwork required to do in Hungary? (1 = Couldn't have been easier; 10 = Extremely difficult)

As Figure 1 shows us, none of the students said that the administration process was really easy, but only 2 people said that it was extremely difficult; the experiences of the rest were in between.

As for the same question about paperwork in China, the answers were more oriented to the 'easy' end of the scale, though a significant number of students said that administration in China, such as getting the residence permit or doing the school registration was rather hard (Figure 2). These difficulties might have come up because of the language barrier and the unknown legal or financial environment. However, the fact that more students considered formalities in China easier than in Hungary, is good news for Chinese education authorities.

83 responses

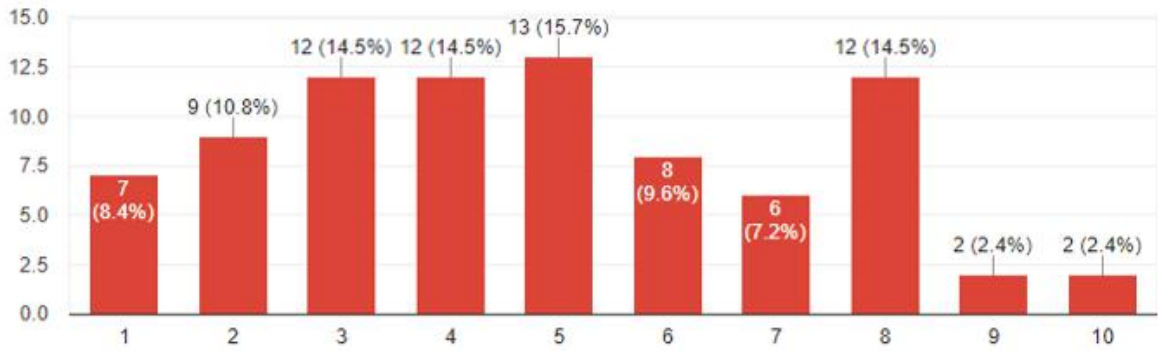


Figure 2. How difficult was the scholarship-related paperwork required to do in China? (1 = Couldn't have been easier; 10 = Extremely difficult)

We asked the students whether they were satisfied with the amount of the scholarship grant. Many of them, 42% were completely satisfied with the sum, and about 40% can be said to be very or rather satisfied. The number of students who were dissatisfied with the grant received was very low (Figure 3). This indicates that the sources allocated to this purpose are sufficient, and there is no urgent need to consider a raise.

81 responses

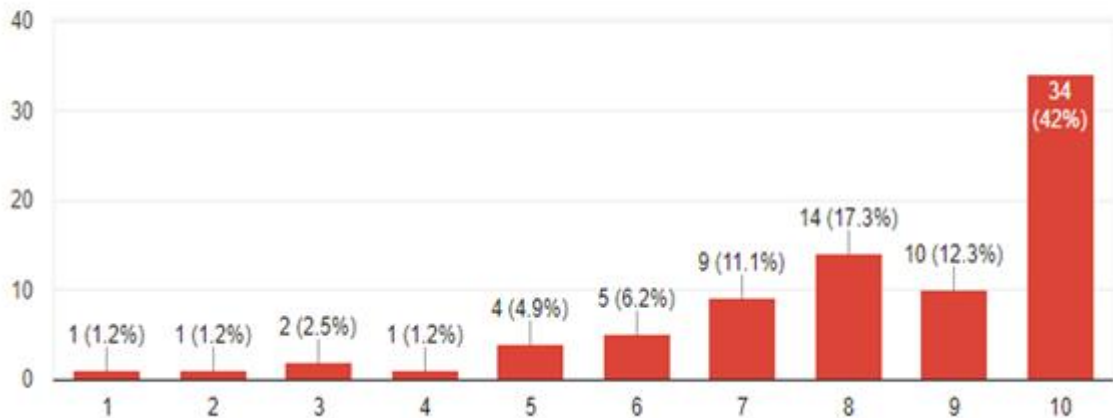


Figure 3. How satisfied were you with the amount of the scholarship grant you received? (1 = It wasn't enough for anything; 10 = It was more than enough)

2.4. Learning environment

A series of questions was related to the study environment in China. Students were generally satisfied with the quality of the education at their Chinese university. 22.9% gave the highest mark (10) to his/her university in this respect, and 60% gave 7, 8 or 9 points, which still means a high level of satisfaction. It is interesting that nobody chose the 'not satisfied at all' option (Figure 4).

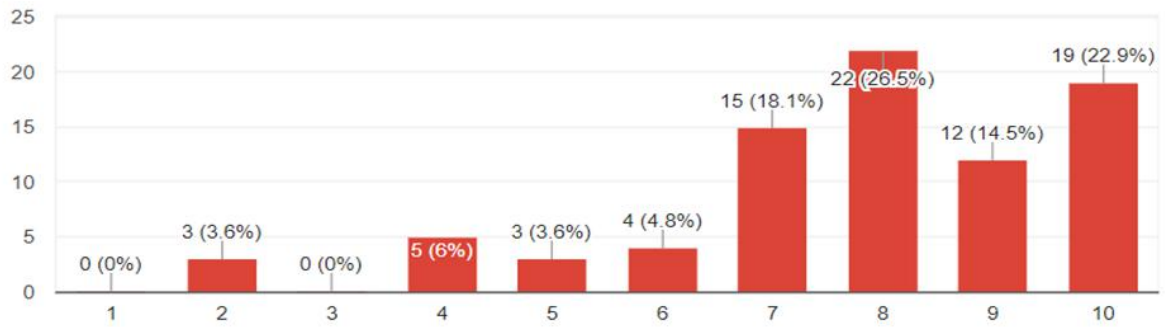


Figure 4. How satisfied were you with the quality of education at your Chinese university? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very satisfied)

We also asked the students' opinion on the infrastructure of their university in China (condition of the buildings, technical facilities of the classrooms, etc.). The answers were overwhelmingly positive: 27.6% gave the highest mark (10), and 61.4% gave 7, 8 or 9, while nobody gave 1, 2 or 3. This shows that the efforts of Chinese institutions to modernize their infrastructure were very successful, and that they can now provide a very good physical environment for foreign students.

Respondents were also mostly satisfied with the study materials at their Chinese institutions, though some corrections could be made in this respect. 19.3% were completely satisfied (10 points), while 63.9% gave a mark of 7, 8 or 9; the relative majority (28.9%) gave an 8. None gave 1 or 2, and altogether 8.4% gave 3, 4 or 5, showing a level of dissatisfaction. This means that teachers generally choose textbooks and other materials in a way that corresponds to the students' needs.

As for the conditions of the dormitory, opinions scattered. The relative majority, 24.1% were maximally satisfied (10 points), while 45.8 gave a mark of 7, 8 or 9, showing a positive opinion. A fifth of the respondents (22.8%) gave a mark of 5 or less, indicating a demand for improvement.

We were also interested in the effects of the language classes on the students' language learning. The answers were overwhelmingly positive: 36.6% awarded maximum points and 46.4% chose 7, 8 or 9 on a scale of 10. It would be interesting to find out why 13.4% of the students gave a mark of 5 or less (Figure 5).

82 responses

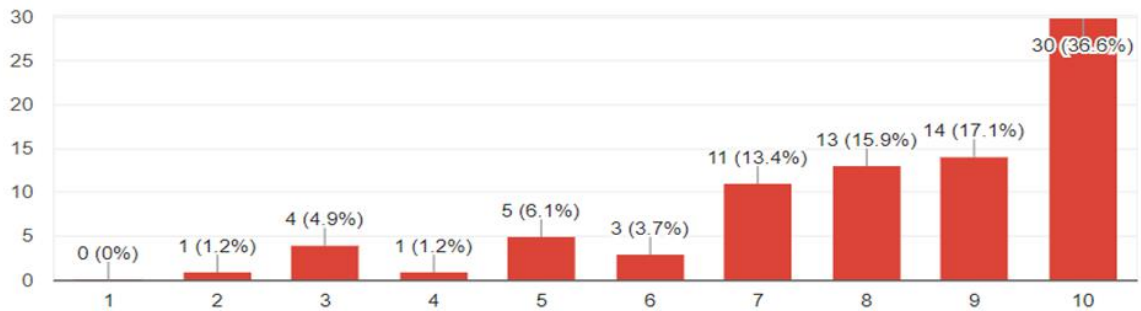


Figure 5. To what extent did the language classes contribute to your progress in the Chinese language? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

We also inquired about the impact the environment outside the school had on the Chinese language level of the students. The answers here were even more positive, as more than half of the respondents (53%) gave a maximum mark of 10, and most of the rest (altogether 37.3%) gave 7, 8 or 9 points. Only 4 students out of 83 responded with a mark of 5 or less (Figure 6). This means that students are very conscious about the importance of the native language environment in their language learning. The basic idea justifying the scholarship programs, namely, that native environment is extremely useful for language learning, seems to be correct.

83 responses

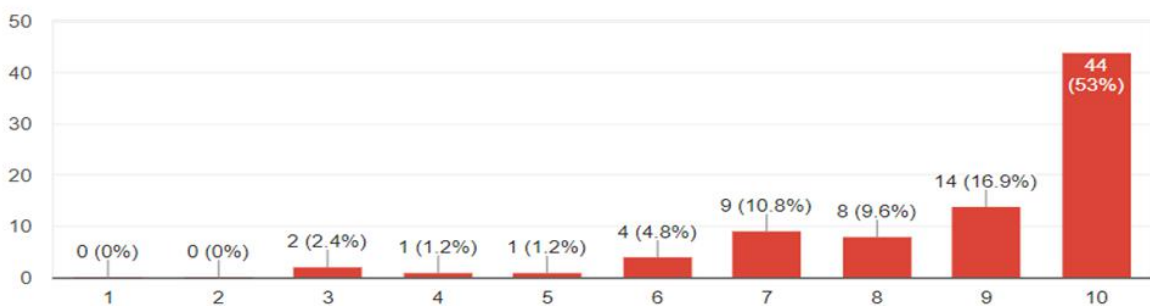


Figure 6. To what extent did the environment outside the school contribute to your progress in the Chinese language? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

Contrary to the importance of the language environment, unfortunately, most students did not spend much of their spare time with Chinese people. When asked about whom they spent their free time with, a relative majority, 31.3% chose ‘mostly Hungarians and other foreigners’, and 26.5% said ‘mostly other foreigners’; only a tiny minority, 9.6% spent their free time mostly with Chinese (the rest said that they were both with foreigners and Chinese). The same small number of students (9.6%) stated that he/she communicated mostly with Chinese people on the internet. 44.6% said that he/she talked to Chinese people daily (apart from the classes and short conversations such as greetings, food ordering, etc.), which, we believe, should be a much higher rate. 24.1% talked to Chinese two or three times a week,

while the remaining third of the respondents did so even less often. It would be of utmost importance to find out why this is the case and figure out a way to maximize the contacts between foreign students and Chinese so as to improve the language learning experience and mutual understanding. The survey corroborated our personal experience according to which many foreign students do not use well the opportunity of studying in a native Chinese environment.

Despite this problem, the students feel that their time in China as a whole added greatly to their progress in the language. When asked about the contribution the scholarship made to their language skills, a supermajority of the students answered with a maximum of 10 points (62%) and another 31.8% gave 7 to 9 points. Only 3 people (3.6%) gave 5 points or less. This means that the scholarship programs reach their goal in general and the overwhelming majority of the exchange students consider them very useful (Figure 7).

82 responses

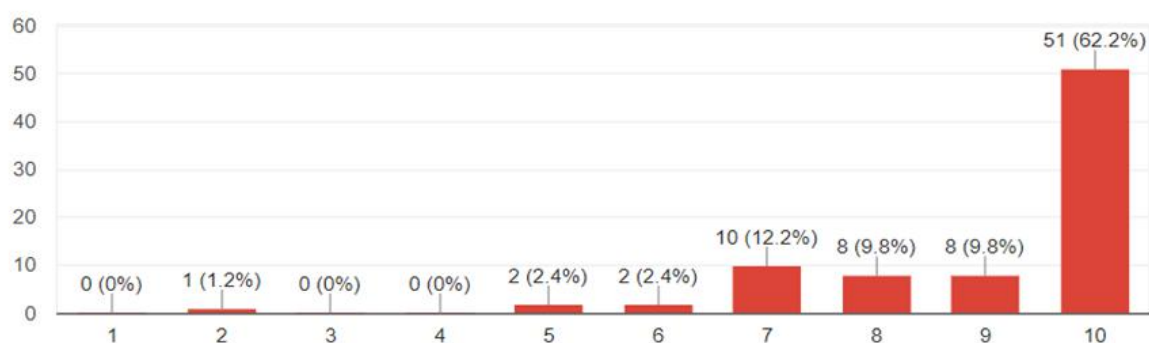


Figure 7. To what extent did the scholarship opportunity, on the whole, contribute to your progress in the Chinese language? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

The positive impact of the scholarships is shown by the fact that most of the students said that they would like to apply for another scholarship grant to China in the future. A third of the respondents (31.7%) indicated a maximal desire (10 points) to apply again, and almost another third (28.1%) gave a mark of 7, 8 or 9. The pattern of the answers is, however, more mixed than at the previous questions. It is interesting that 12.2% absolutely does not want to make it into China again as a student, and altogether a third (32.8) of the students responded negatively, with 5 or less points (Figure 8). This can be, of course, for many reasons, for example some might want to get a job, and do not study anymore.

82 responses

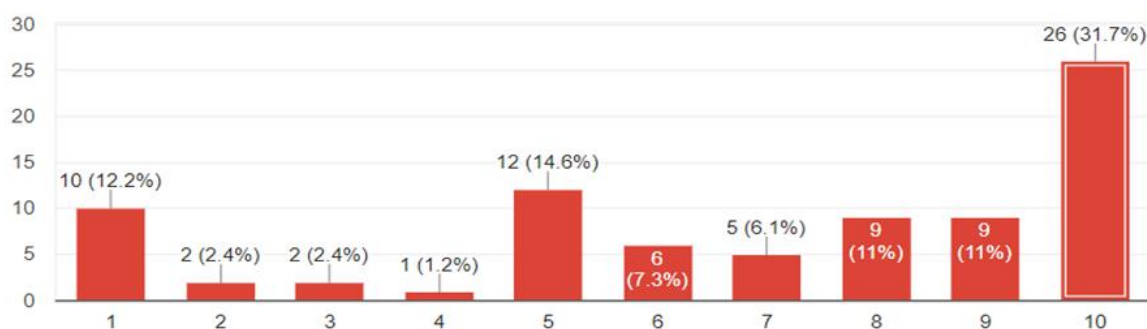


Figure 8. Would you like to apply for another scholarship grant to China? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

It is very comforting to see that when asked whether they regretted their decision concerning studying in China, 83.1% of the students selected the option ‘not at all’, and other 8.4% gave a clearly negative answer. There was a small minority, 3 students out of 83 (3.6%) who said that they completely regretted their decision, and another 4 (4.8%) indicated some level of regret. This means that more than 90% of the students evaluate their choice of studying in China very positively (Figure 9). The responses to another question also show the positive opinion about the scholarship opportunities in China: an incredibly high rate of students, 86.7% would certainly suggest their friends studying Chinese to apply for a scholarship, and 10.8% also gave a positive answer. There was only one student who would not suggest this to a friend. This shows that the scholarship system works effectively and the students themselves are highly satisfied with the opportunities and conditions of studying in China.

83 responses

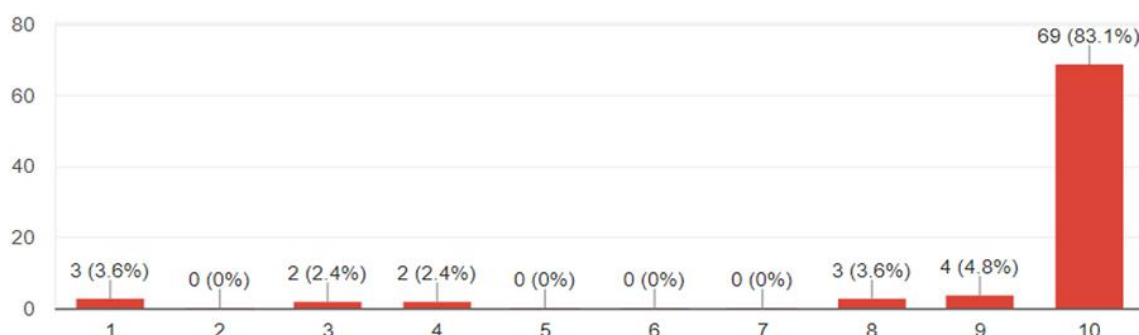


Figure 9. Do you have any regret concerning your application for the Chinese scholarship? (1 = I completely regret; 10 = Not at all)

2.4. Perspectives of learning Chinese

The soft power of a country is strongly related to the popularity of and the importance attached to its language. When asked whether they would advise their friends to learn Chinese, most of the respondents gave a positive answer. However, those who would do so absolutely (10 points), formed a minority of 20.7%, and the other students are somewhat less

enthusiastic. On the other hand, less than a fifth (18.2%) gave 5 or less points, meaning an answer tending to the negative (Figure 10).

82 responses

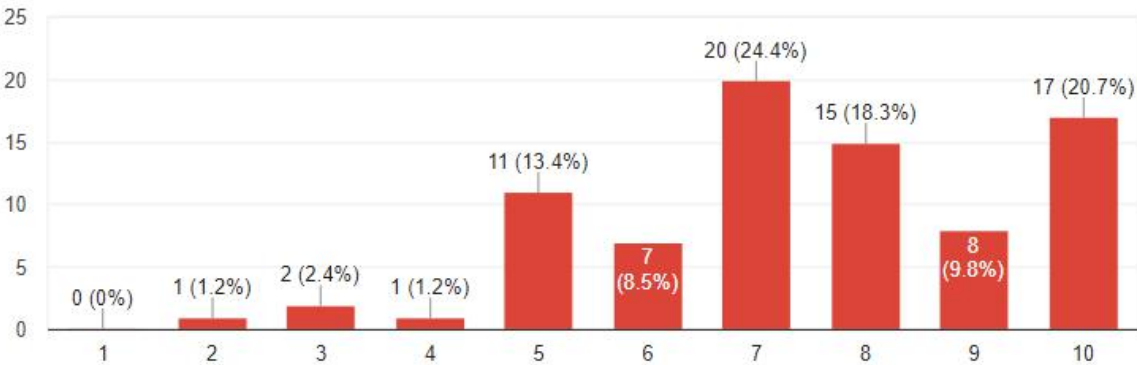


Figure 10. To what degree would you advise your friends, not learning Chinese, to learn it? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Absolutely)

According to our experiences, the aim of learning Chinese for most of the students is to get an advantageous position on the job market. This is also reflected in the answers to our next question that dealt with the perceived advantage of speaking Chinese. An overwhelming majority considers speaking Chinese advantageous, and a relative majority (30.1%) gave the maximal mark of 10. 57.9% awarded a mark of 7, 8 or 9, and only one respondent said that knowing Chinese does not constitute an advantage at all.

83 responses

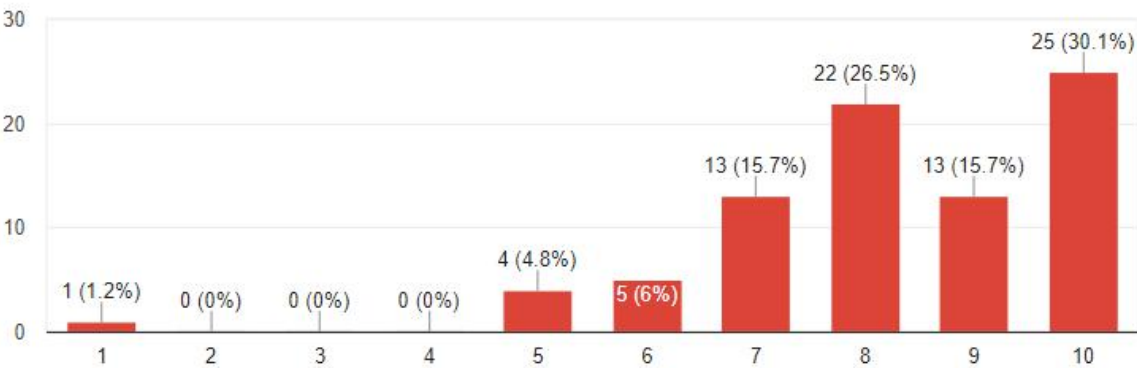


Figure 11. To what degree do you think the knowledge of the Chinese language is an advantage on the job market? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Huge)

As we all know, Chinese is a very complicated language, and it takes much time and energy to master it. We asked the students whether it is worth the effort, and the answers were mainly positive. A relative majority, 31.3% gave a maximum of 10 points, and altogether 53.1% gave 7, 8 or 9 points, meaning a positive answer. The number of students who clearly said that it was not worth the effort to learn Chinese is very low, below 5% (Figure 12).

83 responses

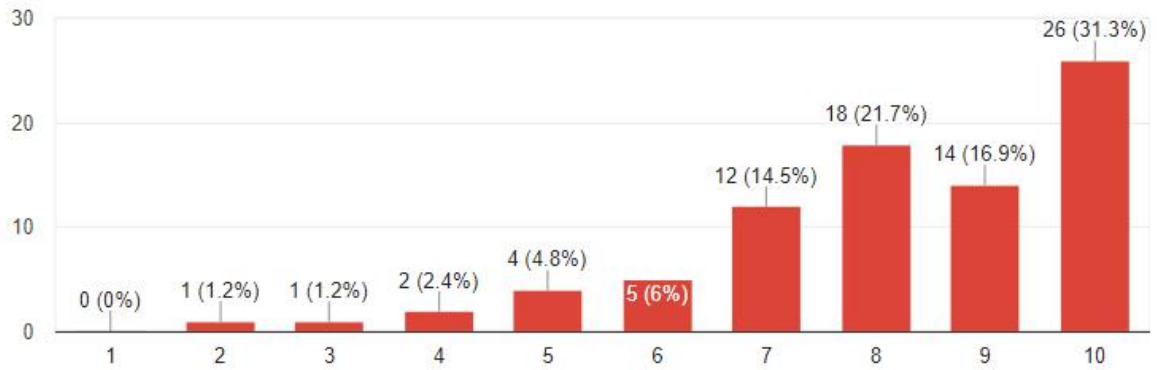


Figure 12. Considering the necessary time and energy, do you think it is worth it to study Chinese? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

The same positive evaluation of learning Chinese was mirrored in the answers to our question about the degree of regret students feel for having started to learn Chinese. An astonishingly high 69.9% said that they do not regret it at all that they had chosen Chinese; 26.5% has a little negative feeling, and only 3 out of the 83 respondent (3.6%) indicated that they regretted learning Chinese.

We also asked the students about personal life choices related to China. It turned out that most respondents would like to work in a Chinese-speaking territory in the future, but they have different level of enthusiasm about it, and the answers are scattered. A little less than a third of the respondents (28.9%) gave a maximum mark of 10, indicating a strong desire to work in a Chinese territory. Another 36% gave 7, 8 or 9 points, meaning a considerable interest in working in China. However, the answers of 27.6% were in the negative range, meaning that almost a third of the students who learned Chinese in China does not plan to work there (Figure 13). This is a rather large number and this phenomenon needs further investigation.

83 responses

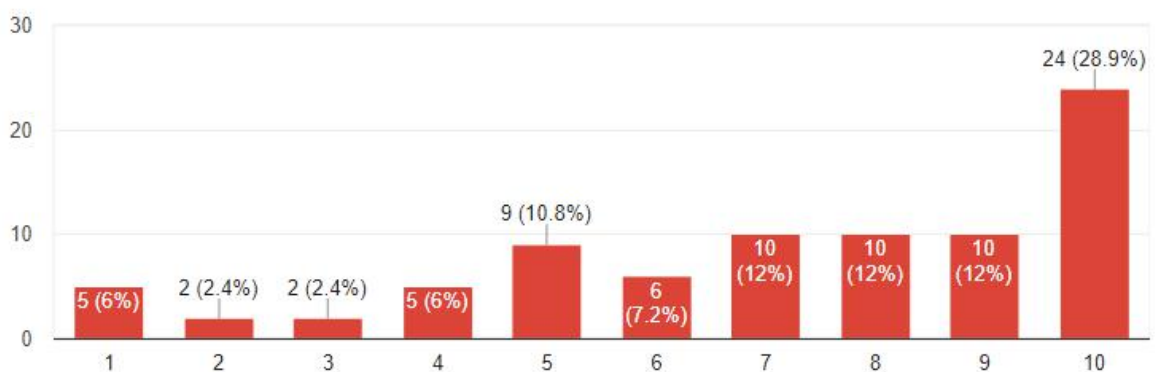


Figure 13. To what degree would you like to work in a Chinese-speaking territory in the future? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

It is one thing that one wants to work in China, but whether he/she has a chance to do so is another. So we asked the students if they feel that there will be a chance for them to work in a Chinese-speaking territory in the future. The answers, we believe, also reflect what the students think of China’s future and its integration into the global system. Reactions were mainly positive, 21.7% saying that it is most certain that they will have an opportunity to work in China (10 points), and 41% giving a mark of 7 to 9. A fifth of the students (22.8%) is not so optimistic, picking a mark of 5 or less (Figure 14).

83 responses

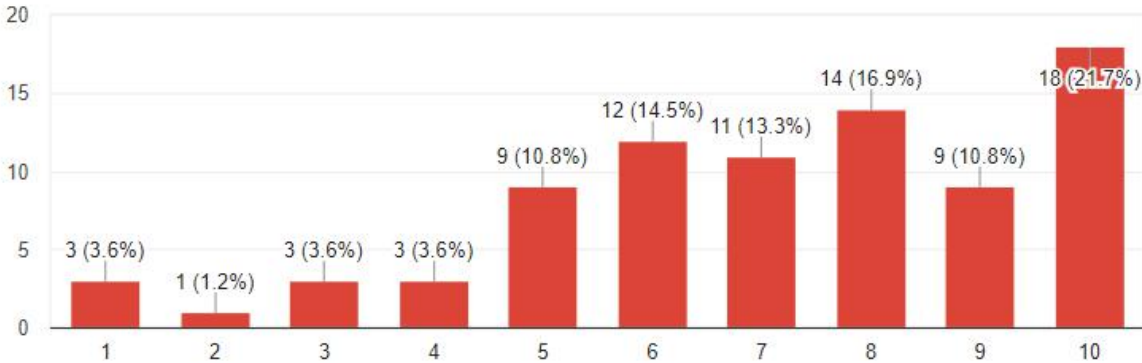


Figure 14. To what degree do you think it realistic for you to have an opportunity to work in a Chinese-speaking territory in the future? (1 = not at all; 10 = Very much)

Naturally, Chinese language can be used outside China as well, so we also asked the students whether they would like to have a job in a working place where they can use their Chinese skills. More than half of the respondents, 53.7% indicated a maximum desire to find a job like that, and most of the rest also gave a positive answer. There was only one student who said that he/she would not like to use his/her knowledge of Chinese in work at all, and altogether a tiny fraction, 4 students (4.8%) gave a mark of 5 or less (Figure 15). It is interesting to note that there is a significant difference between the number of students who would like to work in China, and of those who would like to work in a place where their Chinese can be used.

82 responses

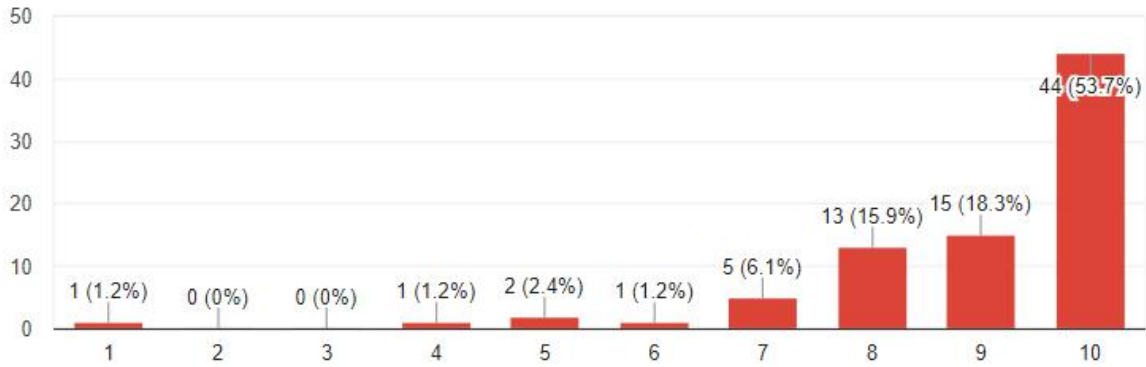


Figure 15. To what degree would you like to work in a working place where you can use your Chinese? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

Similarly to the question regarding working opportunities in China, we also asked the students whether they believe they will have a chance to get a job in which they can use their knowledge of Chinese. Most students were very optimistic about it, 41% giving a maximum mark of 10 points, and 39.7% being clearly positive (7 to 9). Not one student said that there is no chance at all to get such a job, and only 12% gave a mark or 5 or less, indicating a rather pessimistic attitude about the usage of Chinese at the job market (Figure 16).

83 responses

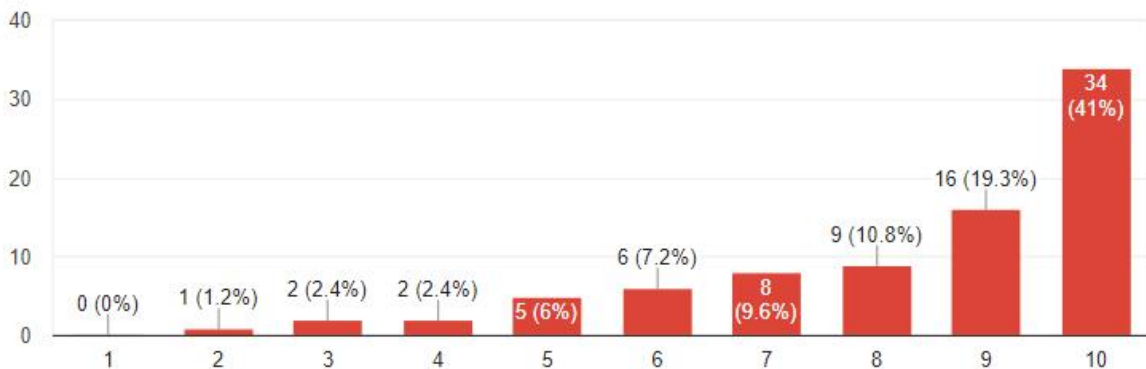


Figure 16. To what degree do you think it realistic for you to find a job in a working place where you can use your Chinese in the future? (1 = Not at all; 10 = Very much)

2.5. Personal preferences and associations

The last part of the survey dealt with the students' feelings and opinion about the Chinese environment. The favourite cities of the respondents were Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou, but Nanjing, Qingdao and Xi'an were also on the list. This correlates with the most popular choices of tourists coming to China.

We were also curious about whether exchange students developed new habits while staying in China. A significant number of respondents answered they started to drink boiled

water, eat Chinese food, and do more exercise (mainly riding the bicycle or go jogging); some also used their mobile phone more frequently, got immersed in online shopping and drank more tea. There were also respondents who started to use chopsticks and kept this habit at home, ones who got used to push others on the streets, and some who developed the habit of humming as a reaction when speaking to other people. On the other hand, many also broke with old habits in China, such as drinking coffee and milk, as well as eating soup. Some students started smoking in China, while others, nearly the same number, said they quit smoking there.

To catch a glimpse of what the main thoughts are about China among the students, we asked them to write down their very first 3 associations concerning the country. The twelve most frequent words were Travelling, Friends, Experience, Improvement, Practice, Culture, Smog, Risk, Language, Study, Loneliness and Challenge (Figure 17).



Figure 17. What three words come to your mind first when thinking of China?

At the end of the survey, we requested the students to share with us their suggestions to the institutions and organs that manage the scholarships and exchange students. In general, most participants said it would be useful to provide more opportunities for practicing the language, such as providing payed language partners or the mixing of Chinese and foreign roommates. More common activities and events could also be good options, and some suggested that students be sent to smaller cities with less foreigners. As for the Chinese authorities, students would like to get more information, detailed description about the application and registration process and English-language materials. Some students complained about the slow decision-making process and the uncertainty of the success of the scholarship application till the last minute. More transparency and less surprises are needed on both sides.

3. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the era of Reform and Opening 40 years ago, China has spared no effort to internationalize its higher education system and attract more and more foreign students to its universities. The number of exchange students has increased four-hundred-fold since 1978, and we could still observe an increasing trend in recent years. China will easily reach its goal of receiving 500,000 international students by 2020, as set in its 2010-2020 National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (Hill 2017). The opening of Chinese education for foreigners is part of the soft power strategy of the country, directed at the future elite of the societies of other countries. The level of soft power and the impact of soft power efforts are, however, hard to measure, even though it would be crucial to know to what degree these efforts work.

We conducted a pilot survey among a unique group of international students in China, namely, young Hungarians who had studied in the country for at least one semester between 2012 and 2017. While this group is not at all representative of the hundreds of thousands of students who study in China each year, the findings of our survey may still be of interest for education officials on both sides.

The information above are just a part of the data we collected. There are several points in the survey which could be studied in more detail, and naturally, it would be very useful to conduct much deeper surveys on a regular basis. It could be also interesting to compare the results with data from other countries so that organisers and officials could learn about the differences and develop more targeted programs, making scholarships more attractive for the young generations of people from different cultures.

The results of the survey indicate that Chinese soft power measures targeted at foreign students are quite efficient and successful. An overwhelming majority of our respondents had a very positive experience in China, is satisfied with the study environment, considers the scholarship opportunity very useful for the progress in his/her studies, and plans to use his/her knowledge of Chinese in his/her work in the future. Students are also very optimistic about the usefulness of knowing Chinese and the opportunities it brings to them. This indicates a perceived high level of integration of China into the global economic and political system. Some improvements, however, could still be made in the system of scholarships, e.g. the paperwork could be made easier, information should be made more accessible, and more opportunities must be provided to build people-to-people relations with Chinese students. Our pilot study clearly shows that Chinese scholarship programs do work. However, there is still some room to make them work better, contributing to the elevation of China's global position and prestige, and the development of its international relations.

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