

# The Power of Tradition Confucius Institutes and cultural diplomacy in the Visegrád Four countries

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**ABSTRACT:** In the past few decades, educational and cultural institutions have become increasingly widespread and popular all over the world. The aim of non-profit public organizations such as Britain's British Council, Germany's Goethe-Institut, France's Alliance Française or Spain's Instituto Cervantes is promoting language and culture as well as facilitating teaching and cultural exchanges. Confucius Institute (孔子学院) of the People's Republic of China, founded in 2004, is a remarkably fast-growing example for such institutions. As of now, there are more than 700 Confucius Institutes all over six continents. The institutions named after the probably best known Chinese philosopher co-operate with local universities, sharing finances, promoting language courses, training teachers, organizing language exams and contests and hosting cultural and artistic events. The —trademark name is, unsurprisingly, often associated with China's projection of soft power in order to improve the country's international image, and, possibly, using diplomatic manipulation. Scrutinized or not, Chinese public diplomacy through Confucius Institutes has been a phenomenal success story so far. China's relations with the Visegrad Group countries have lately seen a significant growth within the ties of the so-called 16+1 platform and the One Belt, One Road Initiative, both established in 2013. As Chinese investment approach usually walks hand in hand with soft power projection, it is no different in case of the V4 countries. In this paper I provide a comparative overview of Confucius Institutes in the four Visegrad countries including statistical data, the institutions' fields and ways of operation and co-operation as well as the impact of this significant soft power push on the present and future of V4-China relations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The year is 1335. Three European kings, namely Charles I of Hungary, Casimir III of Poland and John I of Bohemia participate in a congress taking place in the beautiful castle town of Visegrád overlooking river Danube. They form an alliance against the Habsburgs and agree to create new commercial routes bypassing Vienna in order to obtain easy and swift access to other markets of Europe (Hornat, 2021, p. 12).

At this time in China, the ruling dynasty is the Mongolian Yuan (1271-1368), with Emperor Huizong (1333-1368, originally Toghon Temür) on the throne. Huizong's despotic reign can be characterized as disordered from the start, resulting in him being the last Yuan emperor. However, despite the foreign rule, Chinese culture is already versatile and thriving, with special regard to the advancements in science, medicine and printing. (Salát, 2009, pp. 64-66.) It is interesting to note here, that by this time, an explorer from

Europe has already been to China: he was Marco Polo, whose travels took place between 1271 and 1295. On the contrary, the East Asian empire has not yet sent anyone to see Europe.

Approximately 656 years later, a Visegrád summit is held again by the three leaders of these states. This time around, the leaders are József Antall of Hungary, Lech Wałęsa of Poland and Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia. They sign a new agreement and with that, an economic, political and diplomatic alliance is formed. With Czechoslovakia's peaceful dissolution into Czech Republic and Slovakia on 1 January 1993, the Visegrád Group or V4 is formed with the purpose of the joint representation and coordination of the economic, diplomatic and political interests of these countries, coordination of possible steps (Hornat, 2021, pp. 21-22).

In the People's Republic of China, 1991 is also marked with an agreement, namely the Sino-Soviet Border Treaty, signed in order to resolve the border disputes between the two large states. Economically, Chinese development is remarkable (although not without flaws, mostly due to corruption) and what is more, the East Asian country is recovering from the tragic events of the Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989 and is on the way of opening up and joining the "global game" of international relations (Dillon, 2010, p. 194).

Now, the year is 2020, and times have certainly changed comparing to the 13<sup>th</sup> century when Europe wanted to explore China and profit from the discovery. The People's Republic of China and the Visegrád Group do not have any common history together, yet they are now connected. Next to the political and economic ties, there is a new phenomenon in international relations that, if used correctly, could be a true game-changer. From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the East Asian superpower has had all the intentions to use soft power in order to globally popularize its culture, and along with that, extend its economic and political influence. Recently, as China's attention has turned towards the Central Eastern European region, soft power has also arrived to us. In this work, I intend to discover how China operates its most effective means of soft power, the non-profit educational and cultural network of Confucius Institutes in the V4 countries, respectively, and how this special kind of cultural diplomacy is associated with China's political and economic goals in the area.

## II. SOFT POWER IN THE AGE OF INTERDEPENDENCE

As mentioned above, the term “soft power” was first described and explained by Joseph S. Nye in the late 1980s, and to this day it has been increasingly and widely invoked in connection with international affairs.

According to Nye, soft power, as opposed to hard power, is the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without using force or coercion. In his work he states that for truly successful and powerful countries it is essential to have hard and soft power as well in order to possess the ability of shaping their long-term goals and preferences in the ever-changing world order (Nye, 2008, p. 17).

In the current global rebalancing, bigger and smaller states equally face uncertainties and rapidly changing circumstances in many fields. Thus, it is understandable that soft power has become very relevant in pushing foreign policies. In the work of Nye, the concept of soft power was divided into three basic categories which he referred to as pillars. These are: political values, culture and foreign policy. Sources of soft power can and will vary in the international scene depending on the nature of these pillars (Nye, 2008, p. 32).

It is not difficult at all to recognize the advantages of soft power and the current importance of it in international relations. Establishing and using it in a right and effective way is not nearly as simple as it seems. The development of adequate soft power greatly depends on the receiving “audience” as well as being interconnected with the use of hard (military and economic) power by the state in question. Hard power is usually a straightforward means, whereas in the case of soft power, the need for credibility is necessary. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if a state’s primary goal is to maintain its success and eventually reach a position of regional or global leadership, it must develop and employ both hard and soft power techniques, ideally in a fitting context, the two supporting each other.

This is exactly where the case of the People’s Republic of China becomes relevant and interesting. “Image problems” have been present in the history of the East Asian superpower long before its journey to globalization. China, economically being one of the absolute leaders of the current world order, has more ties and co-dependent relationships with other states than ever, strong skepticism towards its image has been a continuous problem (Ho, 2021, pp. 66-67).

Political leaders of China have probably always been aware of this. However, the policy of opening-up and the well-perceivable, ever-growing need to communicate with the outer world, to get out there and make themselves heard and accepted in regionalisms and inter-regionalisms is relatively new.

The policy of opening up was initiated in the mid-to-late 1990s with the encouragement of Chinese enterprises to invest overseas. Only in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the

economic strategy extended with various soft power policies in order to eliminate the superpower’s faulty public image, something that would otherwise hinder the global competitiveness that has become one of China’s main goals to be reached and maintained (Yan, 2007, pp. 11-18).

Ever since the start of the opening-up policy, the growing connections between China and other states have made the East Asian country and the rest of the world interdependent. As – already according to Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, the development of the world became inseparable from China; thus, the People’s Republic of China has more than ever been in need of communicating its culture. The image of a nation is crucial in international relations – a favorable one could have an essential role in the assertion of influence, whereas a negative national image may become a significant strategic threat.

## III. CHINESE NATIONAL IMAGE – TO PROJECT AND PERCEIVE

What is the reason for China’s long-present image problem? While the country has been one of the world’s most powerful and advanced states throughout most of known history, the way Chinese view themselves and their nation – superior and sophisticated – has never been in alignment with the outer world’s perception of China as being a country that is assertive, aggressive, threatening.

One of the most evident reasoning for that is the incredibly fast change the People’s Republic of China has gone through starting from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The political and economic reforms have altered China so significantly that it barely had any time to accordingly reshape its image projected outwards. Another understanding defines the image of a nation as the behavior of a sovereign state and its people on international stage. This is where the contradictory view becomes relevant, as the foreign policy of the People’s Republic of China has been increasingly criticized as being somewhat two-faced. A very current instance for this is the East Asian superpower’s assertiveness in the South China Sea disputes, including the complete rejection of the international legal verdict, meanwhile wanting to be included in regional and international organizations, investing overseas and nurturing fruitful bi- and multilateral relations with as many states as possible (*Global Conflict Tracker – Territorial Disputes on the South China Sea*).

The above described mixture of friendliness and arrogance communicated to the world in various media reports generally results in a mostly negative portrayal. The main perceptions of China since the opening-up policy have been switching between military threat and political, ideological concern, now with the former taking the lead. The “China threat” idea has gained traction in world media – the concept of the People’s Republic of China wanting to take over the world and become the only “reigning power” of a new global order is ever-present (Hartig, 2015, pp. 43-44).

Now we have the negative image, yet for a contrast another thing is needed: the way China wants to be seen. In the past, China considered itself superior to other peoples, whom it ranked according to how closely they followed Chinese culture. On the contrary, the current willingness of joining international organizations and having many allies in the regional and inter-regional field as well has been acted on very consciously by the Chinese government, highlighting the “Dragon” in fact being a peace-loving, internationally co-operating major power, one that only wishes to continue its journey of development (“Peaceful Rise”) until fulfilling the current catchphrase “Chinese Dream, while making its voice heard globally (Gill, 2017, pp. 123-124).

#### IV. CHINA MAKES ITS CULTURE GO GLOBAL

The Chinese approach of the concept of soft power introduced and utilized by the government is mostly consistent with the definition put forward by Nye. However, similarly to almost everything the People’s Republic of China includes in its political agenda, soft power also can not go without distinctive “Chinese characteristics”.

According to the view of the Chinese leadership, soft power is important for strengthening national identity and ethnic unity through the attraction of Han culture. Culture and traditions undoubtedly have a central place in China’s interpretation of soft power, something that Joseph Nye’s definition does not emphasize when describing the general concept. Within the cultural aspect, Mandarin Chinese language is widely seen as a means through which a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and China itself can be transmitted to the world (Le Corre, 2016, pp. 11-12).

Confucius, the probably best-known philosopher of Chinese history was chosen as the figurehead of the cultural institute project grounded in the above-described language ideology. After being seen as feudal and outdated throughout most of the tumultuous 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the early 2000s on Confucian ideologies have experienced a major revival. Values like “Harmonious Society” (和谐社会 *héxié shèhuì*) and “Harmonious World” (和谐世界 *héxié shìjiè*) have become popular with the Chinese public and were quickly deemed as slogans fit for promoting and popularizing all that the People’s Republic of China culturally stands for (Zhu, 2019, pp. 117-120).

The namesake is well-known worldwide, but what is a Confucius Institute (Kǒngzǐ Xuéyuàn, 孔子学院)? According to the official definition by Hanban (Confucius Institute Headquarters), it is a non-profit public institute of education established through the co-operation of the People’s Republic of China and another country. Most of the times, Confucius Institutes are set up as partnerships between Hanban, a Chinese and a foreign university, but they can also be between other kinds of institutions (Gill, 2017, pp. 67-70).

The main purpose of these institutes is very similar to that of its European counterparts, i.e. the Alliance Française of France, the Goethe Institute of Germany, the British Council of the United Kingdom or the Instituto Cervantes of Spain, while fitting perfectly into the culture-based soft power with Chinese characteristics: promoting the language and the culture, facilitating cultural exchanges, thus helping foreigners understand China better and ideally profiting from being understood better.

The Confucius Institute Project began in 2004. Probably the most remarkable aspect about it – especially comparing to the cultural institutes of other countries - is the rapidity at which it has developed. As of the end of 2018, there were a total of 530 Confucius Institutes in 149 countries and regions all over the world.

In recent years, the urge to learn Mandarin Chinese has without a doubt grown considerably. Some might ask, what exactly would lead young European or American people to want to master the extremely complex language of a faraway country with such a contradictory reputation? The answer to this lies in a variety of reasons, including China’s almost miraculously rapid development and the great economic influence that came with it; the ever-growing trade and other links between China and other countries all over the world. Job opportunities for Mandarin speakers are increasing year by year and, although it may not be comparable to the impact of the Japanese anime and manga fanaticism or the Korean *hallyu* fever led by “idol” groups and television dramas, Chinese culture – hugely promoted by Confucius Institutes – does also play a significant role (Hartig, 2017, p. 98).

#### V. A NEW-FOUND CONNECTION

Trade and political relations between the People’s Republic of China and most countries of Europe, the V4 group among them, have been established and standing long before China’s rapid rise a global position of economic leadership. However, the relevance of Central and Eastern European countries has not been recognized by China until the early 2010s. The China-CEE (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries), also known as 16+1 is a Chinese government initiative for promoting business and investment relations between the East Asian superpower and 16 countries of Central and Eastern Europe, mostly ones that have traditionally been viewed by China as small, rather insignificant states that are only marginally important regarding China-Europe relations.

Since the year of its founding, summits are held annually, the latest one taking place in Croatia in 2019. The 16+1 cooperation goes hand in hand with the promotion of the European section of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, also known as One Belt One Road 一带一路 or the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road), a strategy by China’s government involving infrastructure development and various types of investments in European, Asian and African countries (Rong, 2019, pp. 97-101).

Before the People's Republic of China has turned its new-found attention towards the Central and Eastern European countries in question, common Chinese knowledge of these individual states was close to nothing. All that was generally known by Chinese people about the region originated from the context of China's ties with the former Soviet Union. The need for understanding the current cultural and historical identity of the CEE and for acknowledging the relevance of co-operating with them not only as a group but individually is relatively new in China (Turcsányi, 2014, pp. 129-134).

Having mentioned individuality, it is essential to differentiate one smaller group (and its members, respectively) within the 16 CEE countries. The Visegrád Four (V4, Visegrád Group), the political and cultural alliance of Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is now probably the most interesting from the Chinese viewpoint of an agenda of closer coordinated strategy and co-operation.

Why would relations with the CEE region and in particular the Visegrad Four suddenly matter so much to the People's Republic of China? The answer to that is easier than one might think. With the current crisis of the European Union, a vacuum was created, one that revealed yet unexploited opportunities in the 16+1 region. Chinese presence in Asia, Africa and Latin America has long been well-developed and stable, thus, seemingly marginal states in Europe appeared to obvious choices for the East Asian superpower to further extend its influence.

As I have stated above, what China knew about the CEE region (as former members of the Eastern Bloc) was outdated and too broad to be well-defined. The current co-operation staying as such could easily have its pitfalls, therefore it has been crucial for the People's Republic of China to be aware of the complexity of the region and the obvious differences between the size and status of the 16+ members. The Visegrád Four, as a well-distinguishable subgroup within the 16 already appeared to be in the right position to serve as a sort of a base for new Chinese investment activities in Europe.

The key slogans of the "New Silk Road" rhetoric communicated by the People's Republic of China include "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit". However, the "China threat" phenomenon cannot be excluded from this narrative, either – criticism has been heavy towards the 16+1 Cooperation, the most amount of concern aimed to the Visegrád Four-China ties. According to some analysts, the growing Chinese involvement in Central Europe, especially the four countries in question, could lead to disaccord in European unity (van der Wende, 2020, pp. 32-34).

Despite the "China threat" concept, V4-China links have seen a significant growth in the last few years. Of the overall activity in the region, Hungary has received the most amount of Chinese FDI, followed by Poland, where agriculture, energy and technological research are the most relevant fields

of cooperation. Both countries have in a way welcomed and encouraged Chinese investment with their "Opening to the East" and "Go China!" policies, respectively. Since Hungary recently vetoed anti-China motions in the EU, it can be said that out of the V4 Group, Sino-Hungarian diplomatic ties are currently the strongest (Noesselt, 2020, p. 43).

Regarding the field of diplomacy, the Polish stance is not as overtly pro-China, whereas in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, ideological concerns are just as present as a generally optimistic approach. However, Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI, primarily in transport and energy infrastructure) is welcome in the latter two V4 member states as well, with aviation industry being promoted at multiple forums. The China Investment Forum, organized annually by the Czech Republic, demonstrates a willingness for closer relations with the East Asian leading power from the part of the Czech leadership (*Confucius Institutes Around the World – 2020*).

Overall, trading ties and co-operation in several other fields between the Visegrád Four countries and China have seen a very evident rise in the last ten years. Since Chinese interest in the region is still very much active, we might be looking at a relatively long-term V4-China relationship, especially within the framework of the One Belt, One Road Initiative.

The concept of Chinese involvement is publicized and marketed as an evident win-win situation both in the People's Republic of China and in the Visegrád Four, respectively. However, as it was mentioned earlier in this work, the "threat card" is not absent, thus, China's image is not even close to that of an impeccable benefactor. Besides the "image problem", it should also not be overlooked that by the People's Republic of China, the V4 region is still being regarded mostly as one entity, with the cultural, linguistic, political and social environments of the individual states many times "safely" ignored.

## VI. THE CONFUCIUS INVASION

No matter how lacking Chinese knowledge is about Hungary, Poland, Slovakia or the Czech Republic as politically and culturally individual countries, the East Asian superpower intends the Visegrád Four to embrace their culture. According to Chinese thinking, establishing friendship before the start of business relations would be the ideal conduct. However, in a great part due to the People's Republic of China's new-found awareness of its image problems and to the emergence of an era where soft power is a key factor of success in international relations, the imagined method has turned into something along the lines of reassuring the target region of China's benign intentions and placidity via the most effective branches of soft power with Chinese characteristics, while already being very much there, forming business ties and investing (Song, 2017, pp. 87-88).

It is here that we come full circle, as leading the Chinese soft power movement of our days is none other than

Confucius. As of now, overall 14 Confucius Institutes exist in the Visegrád Four countries, 5 in Poland, 5 in Hungary, 1 in the Czech Republic and 2 in Slovakia. As it was already explained at the beginning of this work, Confucius Institutes are set up all over the world by Hanban and usually function in co-operation with universities, in many cases built upon the relatively strong foundation of an already existing department of Chinese or East Asian studies (Hartig, 2015, p. 314).

This is undoubtedly a smart strategy: establishing soft power bases where there has already been interest in Chinese language, culture, history, traditions and everything that the now-superpower stands for. It is also interesting to note the possible correlation between the number of existing Confucius Institutes in each country and their respective traditions and levels of interest in the culture of China and the Far East. Moreover, it might be quite relevant to observe that while Chinese people have been looking at the Visegrád Four (along with other countries within the 16) merely as small states of the Post-Soviet Bloc, some scholars of the V4 wanted to gain extensive knowledge of the East Asian country. The following chapters will discuss these ideas, along with the structure and way of operation of the Confucius Institutes of the four countries in question.

## VII. HUNGARY

Sinology, the academic study of Chinese thought, literature, culture, history and language is a discipline that has been in existence long before the modern rise of the People's Republic of China or the emergence of soft power policy. In Hungary, interest towards the Far East has long-standing traditions. In Budapest, at the Faculty of Humanities of Eötvös Loránd University, the first East Asia Institute was founded back in 1924, with the primary purpose of organizing the Hungarian research in Sinology as well as Mandarin Chinese language education. Its successor, now called Institute of the Far East, operates the oldest university level Department of Chinese Studies (*Az ELTE Kínai Tanszékének története*). With the People's Republic of China taking a leading role in the new global order with "miraculous" velocity, the eagerness to learn Chinese has definitely grown among fresh high school graduates, resulting in year after year a bigger number of students choosing Chinese Language and Culture as their major or even minor (meaning an option to take some of the department's classes, in this case especially the linguistic ones, while having another major).

While there are other universities in the Hungarian capital offering Chinese studies – the Department of Chinese Studies at Pázmány Péter Catholic University was founded in 2012 (*PPKE Kínai Tanszék*) The Gate of Dharma Buddhist College established in 1991 had been providing the option of Chinese language courses within the framework of "Buddhist language studies" until 2015 (*A Tan Kapuja Buddhista Főiskola – Alapképzés*) and there is the School of Oriental Languages, originally founded at ELTE in 1995, now operating as an independent institution – the first Confucius Institute in Hungary was established at Eötvös Loránd University in

December 2006. Set up by Hanban, functioning with the co-operation of ELTE and Beijing University of Foreign Languages, the aim of the institution is the development of Sino-Hungarian relations and the popularization of Chinese language and culture in Hungary (*Official Website for ELTE Confucius Institute*).

The Confucius Institute of Eötvös Loránd University has been deemed "excellent" by Hanban four times so far (in 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013). The first time it has received this acknowledgement, just one year after its founding, the Budapest institution was also chosen as one of the best Confucius Institutes in the world. Here, language courses at three different levels are organized, along with the option of attending specific business and economy language classes for those who are interested in pursuing a professional career with Mandarin Chinese. Powered by Hanban, HSK (汉语水平考试 Hanyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì, Chinese Proficiency Test) language exams and their trial versions are organized. Currently, there are around 40 native Chinese teachers at the Confucius Institute of ELTE, teaching university students at bachelor's and master's level as well as groups attending the language courses. Here it is necessary to note that in the past, predominantly adult learners participated in Chinese classes, while nowadays, primary and secondary schoolers can learn the East Asian language within the Confucius Institute framework. From time to time, advanced trainings also take place for high school teachers who are in some way interested in including Chinese and East Asian culture, history and traditions in the curriculum (*Central and Eastern European Regional Center of Confucius Institute*).

In 2013, this institution was entrusted by Hanban with the organization and establishment of the Central and Eastern European Center of Confucius Institute, aiming to provide opportunity for language teachers of the area to increase their professional knowledge and exchange experiences. This commission – brought into play just one year after the official start of China-CEEC/16+1 relations – fits well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century soft power policy with Chinese characteristics: tightening business ties and at the same time promoting language and culture with the creation of a wide network amongst countries engaged in Chinese education. In the center, participants in the training sessions get a chance to deepen their knowledge on the methodology of Chinese language teaching, in order to reach a general improvement in teaching standards and quality will occur in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese at regional level (*Official Website for the Confucius Institute of Szeged*).

Having mentioned long-standing institutes, since the establishment of the one at ELTE in Budapest, four further Confucius Institutes were founded in Hungary. The second one, at the University of Szeged, has been open since the autumn of 2012, in co-operation with Shanghai International Studies University (SISU). Along with the cultural and educational activities, this institute organizes summer schools at SISU for Hungarian students and in January 2019, it

received a delegation from Shaanxi. Those wishing to get an HSK certificate have the opportunity to take the exam not only at the Budapest but at the Szeged institute as well (*Official Website for the Confucius Institute of Miskolc*).

The third Confucius Institute of Hungary, working since August 2013, is in Miskolc. This institution is particularly interesting, as it is in evident connection with the Chinese industrial investment activity in Northern Hungary of recent years. The Confucius Institute of Miskolc is supported by the Beijing University of Chemical Technology and the Hungarian raw material manufacturing company BorsodChem (situated in Kazincbarcika, only 26 kms from Miskolc, the capital of Borsod county), which was purchased by Wanhua Industrial Group in 2011. Again, the Chinese soft power move is very well recognizable here – at the celebration of the institution’s 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it was emphasized that thanks to the investments by the East Asian superpower, about 3800 people have been employed recently just in Miskolc (*Official Website for the Confucius Institute of Pécs*).

Hungary’s second youngest Confucius Institute is also an interesting example for another branch of Chinese soft power. With the co-operation of the University of Pécs and North China University of Science and Technology, the Confucius Institute of Pécs was opened in March 2015. This institution belongs to the Department of Health Sciences of the University of Pécs and it focuses primarily on traditional Chinese medicine. Along with language courses, cultural events, summer camps and the Chinese Bridge Competition, the Pécs institution organizes monthly lecture series with the aim of popularizing this type of medicine in Hungary. Experts of the Confucius Institute of Pécs also offer courses at the university built around the topic of traditional Chinese medicine, specifically about health-cultivating, Chinese herbs, theory and practice of Chinese medicine or qigong (a sort of exercise therapy). In December 2018, the director of the Confucius Institute of Pécs received Personal Excellence Award for his work at the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of Confucius Institutes in Chengdu, Sichuan (*Institute of the Middle and Far East of the Jagiellonian University*).

As the newest establishment in not only Hungary, but in the V4 group as well, the Confucius Institute of Debrecen opened its doors in late 2019. The opening ceremony was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November at the University of Debrecen. At the event, speeches were delivered by Duan Jielong, Ambassador of China in Hungary and Zhang Zhanqi, leader of the delegation from Tianjin Foreign Languages University, with the support of which it was possible to establish this new institution.

According to the Northeastern Hungarian University’s rector, Zoltán Szilvássy, the foundation of a Confucius Institute in Debrecen was well-timed, as in the last few years the university has already formed more than 50 threads of co-operation with Chinese economic, financial and cultural apparatuses. The People’s Republic of China is one of the most important strategic target areas for the University of

Debrecen, which currently provides education for more than 300 Chinese students.

A specific focus subject is yet to be identified for this new institution, however, the support of Tianjin Foreign Languages University implies a strong linguistic basis, along with an already active student and teacher exchange program.

## VIII. POLAND

The first Confucius Institute of Poland was established in 2006 in Krakow, with the co-operation of Jagiellonian University’s Institute of Middle and Far East and Beijing Foreign Studies University. Similarly to the first Hungarian Confucius Institute at Eötvös Loránd University, this institution has also been built upon a firm foundation of linguistic and cultural education as well as a strong interest towards the Orient. However, unlike the long-standing unit at ELTE of Budapest, the Institute of Middle and Far East is relatively new at Jagiellonian University. There is a wide range of linguistic options at this institution, the Mandarin Chinese offered by the Confucius Institute. It is important to note that at Jagiellonian University students now have the option to pursue “Asian Studies” as a major, focusing on the in-depth analysis of contemporary political, social and economic phenomena of the Far East, and naturally - among other topics -, the rise of the People’s Republic of China (*Metamorphoses – 30 years of transformations in China, 30 years of Sinology in Poznań - 10 years of Confucius Institute at Adam Mickiewicz University*).

The second Confucius Institute in Poland was established to long after the first one’s founding. It is situated in Poznań and was inaugurated in June 2008 at Adam Mickiewicz University. This Confucius Institute can be categorized as one of those built upon a firm cultural and linguistic base: in 2018, the Department of Chinese Studies of this university celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As 2018 was also the Poznań Confucius Institute’s 10<sup>th</sup> year of operation, a conference titled “Metamorphoses” was organized in honor of long-standing traditions in Sinology. The 3-day event focused on transformations, and among many other topics, contemporary interpretations of Confucian philosophy were discussed, demonstrating to the audience that the ancient scholar’s name is not merely a keyword for Chinese soft power play, but his legacy is relevant and worth keeping alive (*Official Website of the Confucius Institute of Opole*).

Poland’s third Confucius Institute opened its doors in 2008, the same year as the one in Poznań. This institution is in the city of Opole, established with the co-operation of Opole University of Technology and Beijing University of Technology. Confucius Institute Opole is aimed at the creation and broadening of academic, economic and cultural bonds between Poland and China, alongside the “usual” language courses and cultural activities also organizing business seminars and preparing teachers for Polish high schools that offer (or would like to offer) Chinese language. In March 2012, the Opole Confucius Institute participated in an

international interdisciplinary scientific conference titled “Made in China – Dialogue about the Middle Kingdom”. The event took place at the University of Silesia in Katowice, and the Opole institution was invited to introduce its Post-Master Education Project on China-Europe cross-cultural management (*Official Website of the Confucius Institute of Wrocław*).

2008 could be called the “peak year” of Confucius Institutes in Poland: in December of the same year, another institution was established at the University of Wrocław, operated jointly with Xiamen University. In addition to classes taught at the University of Wrocław and the Confucius Institute, the institution also offers courses at the University of Environmental and Life Sciences, University of Economics and the University of Technology as well as in primary schools, secondary schools, high schools and in kindergartens, benefitting several different age groups and language learning goals (*Opening of the Confucius Institute at the University of Gdańsk*).

The youngest Confucius Institute of Poland was founded in September 2015, with the joint agreement of the University of Gdańsk and China Youth University of Political Studies. Efforts to establish this institution as the center of promoting Chinese language and culture in Pomerania had been going on since 2009, thus, with the final success, the opening ceremony was accordingly grand. Receiving special attention from Hanban, the Confucius Institute of Gdańsk is planned to become a “golden bridge” connecting Poland and China, playing an important role in enhancing the exchanges and deepening the friendship between the two countries – once again, very much in sync with the People’s Republic of China’s aspirations in the Visegrád Four region (*Official Website of the Confucius Institute of Olomouc*).

#### IX. CZECH REPUBLIC

The first – and so far only – Confucius Institute of the Czech Republic was opened in September 2007 at Palacky University in Olomouc, in co-operation with Beijing Foreign Studies University. It must be noted here, that the first institution approached by the Chinese embassy with the opportunity of establishing a Confucius Institute in the country was the prestigious Charles University of Prague, where Sinology has long-standing traditions in the framework of the Department of Far East Studies. However, back in 2007, they were not particularly interested in hosting the first “base” of Chinese soft power – in a big part because they already had a center sponsored by a Taiwan-based organization, so an association with Mainland China could have easily led to backlash from either side. Thus, Palacky University was contacted, this time with success (*Chinese Language Courses at the Confucius Classroom in Prague*).

Since Palacky University also has a strong, dynamic department of Asian Studies providing - among other Oriental languages - the opportunity of Chinese at its Faculty of Arts, the Olomouc Confucius Institute has a strong focus on

Mandarin Chinese language teaching and teacher training. The concept of language courses here is thoroughly thought out - that way it provides much-needed consistency. Classes are organized according to curriculum which has been tested for years in daily practice. Courses are supplemented with lectures, trainings, individual consultations and movie screening about China and Chinese culture. Activities at the institution are not only aimed at university students, but also at professionals and the public.

Although the Confucius Institute at Palacky University is the only such institution in the Czech Republic, with business and economic ties tightening, the People’s Republic of China has found a way to project some soft power at the capital as well. Since September 2014, the Olomouc institute has been providing services at the Confucius Classrooms located in the Diplomatic Academy of Prague. The language courses and cultural activities offered here all are organized by the Confucius Institute at Palacky University, along the same lines and according to the same regulations as the ones in Olomouc (*Official Website of the Confucius Institute of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava*).

#### X. SLOVAKIA

Slovakia’s first Confucius Institute was established in Bratislava in February 2007, based on the co-operation agreement between Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava and Tianjin University (*Official Website of the Confucius Institute of Comenius University of in Bratislava*). Interestingly, out of the Visegrád Four countries, Slovakia is the only one hosting two Confucius Institutes in one city, namely in its capital, Bratislava: in September 2015, another institution was set up at the Department of East Asian Studies of the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University (where a Chinese Studies Program was already launched in 1988), in co-operation with Shanghai International Business and Economy (SUIBE). Both institutions offer a varied spectrum of courses and cultural events, the newer one having an outstandingly up-to-date website advertising classes on Chinese economy and business, among many other options. The Confucius Institute at Comenius University was officially presented to a Chinese delegation led by the Chinese State Secretary for Science and Technology on 27 November, 2017 (*The Official Opening of Confucius Class (in Nitra)*).

Although the two Confucius Institutes of Slovakia are both located in the capital, on 21st May 2018, the Confucius Class was officially opened at Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA) in Nitra. (Cooperation between SUA with Chinese universities and research institutes has been active and successful since 2014.) The Confucius Class in Nitra organizes student and researcher exchanges as well as summer schools on various topics of culture and economy. At the opening ceremony it was emphasized that this class is the only one of this kind in Europe, thus it is a significant milestone expected to have a great impact on Sino-Slovak relations.

## XI. PERSPECTIVES OF THE CONFUCIUS NETWORK IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

The network of Confucius Institutes is currently the People's Republic of China's leading means of soft power projection. While observing the course of establishment of these institutions in each Visegrád Four country, the history and traditions of the countries and cultures that serve as "bases" for them, we must note some significant details that do not only provide help in forming conclusive thoughts, but also alludes to the possible future of China-V4 ties.

In comparison with area and population, Hungary, with its five Confucius Institutes, seems to be the most open to Chinese soft power of the Visegrád Group. Hungarian Confucius Institutes already have quite well-developed individual foundations and structures, and their aims in the regions they were established at are often well-articulated. It is already interesting to contrast the institution at Eötvös Loránd University, set up on long-standing traditions of Orientalism and Chinese teaching with the one in Miskolc, "born" out of China's use of soft power as a result of strong investment in the Borsod county region. Observing this shows a clearly thought-out process of establishing Confucius Institutes, yet it is important to note here that the beginnings of it were quite effortless in Hungary, thanks to the particular affinity towards the Far East. The case of Hungary presents to us the two main pillars of genuinely successful soft power policy: find a region that is already somewhat open to the culture you wish to promote (also, in the best case, its government is already interested in political and economic co-operation) and also appears ideal for the objectives you wish to use soft power for.

As of Poland, a similar pattern to Hungary can be observed. Interest for Chinese culture has traditionally been present here as well, though it is not as remarkable as in Hungary. We see different focuses and aims here, too, with 2008 being a "Chinese soft power peak", meaning the establishment of three new Confucius Institutes. Accordingly, in a speech in Shanghai during an October 2008 visit, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk defined Polish-Chinese relations as ties emanating from a "natural confidence resulting from tradition and mutual respect". Chinese Vice Premier Zeng Peiyan also paid a visit to Poland in 2008, discussing trade deficit and the potential ways to improve economic co-operation. The fact that these events all happened in the same year indicate the links between the People's Republic of China's objectives in the region and the way it uses soft power to corroborate them.

In Warsaw, there is no Confucius Institute established yet, although the University of Warsaw does indeed offer Mandarin Chinese language at its Faculty of Oriental Studies. This shows a different process of formation compared to that in Hungary, one less built upon traditions or centrality and more focused on the People's Republic of China using soft power to reach current co-operational goals in cities that appear to be ideal for investment.

In the cases of the Confucius Institutes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, a process or course of formation cannot yet be detected. This could be partly since China's relations with these two countries are not as firm as with the other two of the Visegrád Group. The "China threat" card is therefore more significant, and very few experts – or journalists – focus on contemporary Chinese politics or economy to paint a more detailed and complex picture of the East Asian superpower and its intentions. Moreover, China studies have a much shorter history here than in either Hungary or Poland, thus, the establishment of the first Confucius Institutes was not nearly as evident. Nevertheless, the soft power network is widening in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, noticeably intertwined with the evolving co-operation in business and trade.

Other than Confucius Institutes, other cultural organizations that have relatively strong political ties with both Chinese and local institutes also exist in the Visegrád Group, such as Nagy Fal Magyar Kínai Barátság Egyesület (长城匈中友好协会 Changcheng Xiong Zhong youhao xiehui, Great Wall Association for Sino-Hungarian Friendship) or Smíšená česko-čínská komora vzájemné spolupráce (捷中友好合作协会 Jie Zhong youhao hezuo xiehui, Mixed Czech-Chinese Chamber of Joint Cooperation). These organizations mainly evolve around presenting a positive image of China, with barely any critical aspects discussed. However, even if these NGOs are still active, Confucius Institutes have quickly outperformed them at bringing Chinese culture closer to the public (*Wang Yi meets the Deputy Foreign Ministers of V4 Countries*).

Chinese interest in the Visegrád Group has been constantly increasing in the last few years. At the very first political consultation between the People's Republic of China and the V4, which took place on 22 March 2018 in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor spoke about his hopes about the V4 playing a constructive role in China-Europe relations, helping Europe formulate friendlier policies towards China. Furthermore, he expressed Chinese expectation of the V4 taking the lead of the 16+1 cooperation, helping maintain and develop the "Belt and Road" construction (Pleschová, 2016, p. 72).

The hopes of the East Asian superpower explained above do indeed seem feasible, with the general attitude of V4 governments, despite skeptical at times, still being mostly positive. However, rather than multilateral, the V4-China platform is in reality several bilateral relationship threads with China functioning simultaneously. For that reason, the setting currently is more beneficial to the People's Republic of China than to the four countries (or any other CEE member states).

Although present in several different fields, Chinese investments in the V4 remain relatively small and are dominated by a few larger, more significant acquisitions. This is less than ideal from the perspective of the Visegrád Four countries, especially Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the

two partners that have been more skeptical from the beginning of the V4-China co-operation. The V4-China platform should be more actively developed by the V4 countries themselves in order to kickstart - and be able to keep up - a focused, effective co-operation in various areas, including research, education, promoting trade and investment, and, just as importantly cultural exchanges. Model examples for such a co-operation are the successful V4-Japan and V4-South Korea ties, both relying on their extraordinary “weapons” of soft power (Song, 2017, p. 187).

Certainly, an overall change of economic structure requires significant investments into education, technology and skills transfers. These changes might take years to materialize, however, with the current and noticeably expanding, structured network of Confucius Institutes in the region, the process of clear communication and co-operation could likely be accelerated.

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