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From Multicultural Experiment to Performing “China’s Story”: Complying With Shifting Norms at a Chinese–Hungarian Bilingual School

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ABSTRACT

Adopting a broad understanding of compliance as *adherence to norms*, this study examines the role of the Chinese–Hungarian Bilingual School in Budapest in the propagation of institutional, educational, and civic norms, through an anthropological inquiry into the discourses and practices embraced and enacted by teachers, parents, and students. Set up by bilateral agreement between China and another state, the school we discuss is a unique K-12 educational institution that exemplifies both the potential and the complexity of harnessing education for the globalization of Chinese institutional, educational, and civic norms. Against the background of Hungary’s “Opening to the East” and China’s “going global,” we situate our study at the intersection of foreign propaganda, institutional globalization, and education. The node of contact created by the encounter between the Chinese and Hungarian education systems, each struggling with their own paradoxes and mediated by China’s overlapping frameworks of foreign propaganda and overseas Chinese policies, stands at the center of our inquiry. By analyzing the daily interactions among students, parents, and educators, the article focuses on the borrowing, appropriation, rejection, and coexistence of dual sets of norms. In contrast to Confucius Institutes, where interaction is typically between Chinese instructors and non-Chinese students, the school, with its diverse community of Chinese and Hungarian educators, parents, and students, fosters a complex environment where Chinese teachers and students actively participate in norm propagation while also being influenced by it. Similarly, Hungarian teachers and students emerge as active contributors beyond their role as recipients, showing the context-dependent and oftentimes unexpected nature of the adoption or rejection of norms.

1 | Introduction

As we know since Rousseau (1979 [1763]), public schools do not simply impart knowledge but also inculcate moral values and norms that make citizens, turning educational institutions into a great prism for studying not only educational and institutional but also civic norms. Spending long hours at school shapes children into desirable subjects of the state and the economy by cultivating a

selected set of traits and training them for compliance with authority. Adopting a broad understanding of compliance as *adherence to norms*, this study examines the role of the Chinese–Hungarian Bilingual School (CHBS) in Budapest, Hungary in the propagation of institutional, educational, and civic norms. We understand these respectively as the protocols guiding interactions within organizations; pedagogical standards and practices; and the social and moral standards expected of a good citizen.

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Schools co-instituted by two national educational systems in which the complexity of the convergence and divergence between different sets of institutional, educational, and civic norms could be observed are rare. The school we discuss here is the first, and to our knowledge, the only, K-12 educational institution set up by bilateral agreement between China and another state, and as such offers a unique platform for what the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) calls “goodtelling China’s story” (*jianghao Zhongguo de gushi* 讲好中国故事)¹ in a markedly receptive environment provided by a friendly government. CHBS thus offers a unique vantage point for exploring both China’s attempt at harnessing its diaspora in an educational institution for its “going global” initiative by propagating norms endorsed by the CCP and the Hungarian attempt to attract capital from China by displaying ideological compliance in the form of endorsing a self-censored set of norms. By tracing CHBS’ transformations in the 20 years since its founding, we show how it turned into an arena in which the declining democracy of foreign direct investment (FDI)-dependent Hungary met the globalizing capital and ambitions of the authoritarian Chinese state, co-constituting a convergence of institutional and educational norms. These converging illiberal norms, in turn, trickled down to co-constitute civic norms; yet, in such a heterogenous environment, their convergences and divergences produced unexpected and counterintuitive outcomes.

Comprising a diverse community of Chinese and Hungarian educators, parents, and students, CHBS is an environment more complex than Confucius Institutes (CIs), where most of our knowledge about the propagation of Chinese norms under the aegis of education comes from (see e.g., Hartig 2015; Sahlin 2015; Hubbert 2019; Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020). While at CIs, there is a straightforward exchange between Chinese teachers, who propagate norms, and local students, who receive them, at CHBS, Chinese teachers and students actively participate in norm propagation while also being influenced by it; similarly, Hungarian teachers and students also emerge as active norm propagators rather than mere recipients. This makes CHBS a unique window onto the multidirectional flows of both tacit and presumed norms and practices of compliance in a wide range of settings.

Between September 2022 and March 2023, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with current and former principals, teachers, students, and parents of both Hungarian and Chinese backgrounds to inquire into the following questions: what happens when these two sets of nationally defined norms coexist under the same roof? What are the points of juncture and tension? How are these tensions negotiated? Utilizing an anthropological understanding of norms that pertain to all written and unwritten expectations that prescribe an ideal standard of behavior in a given social setting, we inquire into the discourses and practices embraced and enacted by the teachers, parents, and students of CHBS to explore both the potential and the complexity of harnessing Chinese populations abroad for the globalization of Chinese institutional, educational, and civic norms.

The article is structured in six sections. First, we explain how both education systems that co-instituted CHBS were torn by severe internal contradictions already before their merging. These contradictions continue to matter in defining the kind

of subjects the school is meant to produce (civic norms), how it aims to produce them (educational norms), and its organizational forms (institutional norms). Second, we situate our field of enquiry at the intersection of three policy fields of the Chinese state: external propaganda (*waixuan* 外宣), institutional globalization (*zouchuqu* 走出去), and education. We then proceed to the inner workings of the school and present our findings in three steps: First, we investigate *institutional norms* as they play out in an educational institution explicitly conceived for a diplomatic exchange between norms. Second, we turn to the dynamic interplay between conflicting, competing, and converging educational practices understood as *pedagogical norms* and their aims in forging particular subjects. Finally, we introduce two graduating students as exemplary subjects produced by these conflicting aspirations representing two diametrically opposed *civic norms*. We then conclude with how declining democracy and an FDI-dependent economy in Hungary amidst the globalization of capital from an increasingly authoritarian China converge at the school but are mediated by sufficiently contradictory agencies to produce subjects who embrace divergent and often unexpected norms and aspirations.

2 | Two Education Systems: A Background

Founded in 2004, CHBS is a product of Hungary’s brief period of decentralized, pluralistic educational policies under left-liberal governments (2002–2010) designed to produce rights-bearing democratic citizens. Hungary decentralized school maintenance and operation in 1991, soon after the democratic transition, fostering the autonomy of principals, educators, and students. Education policy in the following two decades was shaped by criticism of a teaching model derided as outdated, Eastern, Socialist, centralized, and “Prussian-style” from a position identified with liberal values, progress, the West, the market, innovation, child-centeredness, and playfulness. The Socialist-Liberal government that took office in 2002 introduced educational reform that was intended to implement these values and linked them to the emancipatory ideals of democratic inclusion, minority recognition, and antiracism (Neumann and Mészáros 2019, 120–121). The original, 2004 manifesto of CHBS attests to its foundation on a multicultural ideal, where “educating students for tolerance and cooperation” is seen as the institution’s most important task (Ágoston 2009).

Since 2010, under the nationalist Fidesz government, Hungary has backpedaled on liberal educational reform, recreating a centralized school system that champions content-oriented, disciplinarian teaching adhering to patriotic and Christian values (Péter 2022). While a national curriculum has always existed, between 1990 and 2012, schools had more freedom in choosing teaching methods and textbooks and in structuring the curriculum. In 2012, the government took charge of schools previously run by local municipalities, centralized textbook publication, and testing, and greatly impaired the professional autonomies of the institutions, principals, and teachers. In the same year, patriotic education was introduced to the National Curriculum (Law CXC/2011 on national public education), followed by military training put in place in selected secondary schools in 2020 (Katonának Tanulnék 2020). The centralization of education coupled with a steady decline in the educational budget brought

about large-scale protests, bringing thousands of teachers, parents, and students to the streets first in the early 2010s and then in 2022–2023. Meanwhile, Hungary's school system ranks top among OECD member states in reinforcing social inequalities (György 2014).

In post-Mao China,² the education system has been subject to fundamental transformations following the launch of market reforms in 1978. The country's economic restructuring demanded that the education system produce new subjects that would represent a competitive force in the global market. At the same time, following the 1989 crackdown on the student-led democracy movement at Tiananmen Square, nationalism came to replace socialism as the basis of political belief and source of party legitimation (Guo 2019; Zhao 2021), complemented by the ideology of meritocracy—the notion that hard work and merit are rewarded with a good life and respect (Howlett 2021).

From the 1990s onwards, an extensive Patriotic Education campaign (*aiguozhuyi jiaoyu* 爱国主义教育) equating China with the Communist Party has been implemented, for the execution of which the public school system offered itself as a self-evident site alongside media channels, military, government units, and workplaces. Starting from a narrative of past victimhood centering around “the century of humiliation,” with China's rapid and spectacular economic growth, the dominant narrative of patriotism gradually shifted toward a didactic exercise on self-confidence and the superiority of the Chinese system (Vickers 2022, 169; Naftali 2024). Articulated through his signature slogan of the “Chinese dream,” under Xi Jinping the moral and martial qualities that explain China's ultimate triumph, condensed in an essentialized and homogenized version of Chinese “culture” based on Han traditions and a pseudo-biological construction of nationhood, came to occupy center stage in state-led nationalism. In 2023, China adopted a new Patriotic Education Law that places new requirements on education (Naftali 2024).

In the Chinese context, contradictions within the school system are driven by the conflicting aims of authoritarian capitalism: (1) training entrepreneurial workers for a flexible market economy, (2) producing obedient subjects of the Party-state, and (3) attenuating inequality that destabilizes the regime. While the first of these provides an incentive for curriculum reform to promote innovation and creativity, the latter two militate against such a reform and favor the exam-driven school system. Successive educational reforms³ under the banner of “education for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) that accompanied China's integration into the global capitalist world system from the 1990s all centered around the dilemma of simultaneously trying to jumpstart the country's innovation economy by encouraging students' ability to be reflective, critical, and creative while also strengthening their adherence to authority (Hansen 2018; Tao 2019; Howlett 2021). Public resistance to educational reform geared toward a more creativity-focused curriculum and away from standardized testing, such as the 2007 “new curriculum reform” further complicates transformation (Pan 2016; Hansen 2018). Schools and parents expressed a general opinion that any move toward a less exam-based system raises concerns that the last more or less merit-based institution in China, the infamously high-stakes national college entrance exam, the gaokao is in jeopardy (Howlett 2021).

The past four decades saw no solution in resolving these contradictions but further exacerbated them as in the meantime, the education system was caught in a spiral of severe educational “involution” (*neijuan* 内卷)—the idea that the Chinese education system “requires ever-increasing amounts of ‘labor’ while yielding ever diminishing ‘returns on investment’” for students and parents (Yang, Ge, and Ownby n.d.). To address increasing inequality in access to education, in 2021, the government introduced the “double reduction policy” (*shuang jian zhengce* 双减政策) aiming to reduce homework and after-school tutoring pressure on primary and secondary school students, as well as to reduce families' spending on expensive tutoring. This attempt was once again met with popular reluctance, as many parents saw this as further increasing inequality in the profoundly involutioned educational competition (Yang, Ge, and Ownby n.d.).

As a school co-instituted by the Chinese and Hungarian public education systems that aim to cater to both a Hungarian and a recent-migrant Chinese population, CHBS is a “contact zone” in which these two systems, each struggling with their own internal tensions, interact, converge and diverge. While both embrace a well-articulated and explicit state-led nationalism and promote patriotic education, they nonetheless promote vastly different and antagonistic ideas about the purpose and meaning of education. In the following section, we situate CHBS against the backdrop of Hungary's “Opening to the East” and China's “Going Global.”

3 | “Big Propaganda” and “Overseas Chinese Work” Meet “Opening to the East”

National image building has been a central concern on the CCP agenda in the 21st century (Hartig 2015). Dissatisfied with what it perceives as a negative image of China abroad, the CCP decided to expand the scope of what it describes as “foreign propaganda” (Brady 2015) to harness a broad range of non-state actors and tools, including social media, foreign “experts” (Fang 2022) and Chinese overseas (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020; Pieke 2022a). This effort, dubbed “big foreign propaganda” (*da waixuan* 大外宣), aims to reclaim the “discursive authority” (*huayuquan* 话语权) over its own representation to counter hostile hegemonic Western representations (Nyíri n.d.; Pieke 2022b). The main strategy of “goodtelling China's story” is to replace the politicized and threatening notions that prevail in Western public discourse with depoliticized, peaceful, and cultural-civilizational terms. This discourse posits the existence of a specifically Chinese set of norms, or values that are supposedly derived from Chinese tradition and, for external consumption are stripped of the epithet “socialist” used in internal circulation. This deliberately vague set of essentialized and homogenized cultural norms is markedly present in China's foreign affairs discourse even as the spread of technical and legal norms represents a central, but undeclared, element in its engagements with foreign governments and international institutions (Kimball et al. 2020).

The PRC has engaged in harnessing migration for what it calls “overseas Chinese work” (*qiaowu gongzuo* 侨务工作) through dedicated state and Party structures since its establishment (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020; Pieke 2022a). Since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s, cultivating Chinese

overseas as a way to improve relations with foreign countries has been an important element of that work (Thunø 2017) but has recently intensified its efforts to mobilize them to promote the “Chinese dream” (Liu 2022b) via the encouragement of self-mobilization among overseas Chinese to serve as “grassroots ambassadors” for the motherland (Liu 2022a). The purview of these efforts has expanded to encompass both Chinese citizens and ethnic Chinese who are non-citizens and to include groups not traditionally seen as belonging to the “overseas Chinese” category, such as international students. The 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012 laid down the directives for engaging overseas Chinese in “promoting national modernization, promoting the peaceful reunification of the motherland, and promoting friendly cooperation between China and foreign countries” (China Embassy n.d.). While some overseas Chinese organizations pursue these tasks in a choreography closely supervised by Chinese authorities (Nyíri 2001; Liu 2005), others have been driven by a genuine desire to let foreigners see the “real China” (Nyíri, Zhang, and Varrall 2010; Zhu and Chen 2023). Although the boundary between top-down and “genuine” grassroots initiatives has become increasingly blurred, both traditional Chinese-language media outside China and social media accounts run by Chinese overseas have been targets of investment and co-optation by China’s central state media (Sun and Sinclair 2016).

Hungary has been a destination of Chinese migration since the late 1980s, and Chinese organizations that emerged in the 1990s have maintained close relations with PRC officials (Nyíri 2001). For example, Hungary was one of the first countries in which a local chapter of the Association for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (*Zhongguo Heping Tongyi Cujinhui* 中国和平统一促进会), a worldwide organization that serves as the prime articulator of the PRC’s official discourse among Chinese overseas, was established (Nyíri 1999). These contacts remained invisible to Hungarian politics until 2002 when Socialist Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy decided to foster closer relations with China in the hope of increasing incoming investments. This course was accelerated by Viktor Orbán’s nationalist government in office since 2010, which went beyond seeking economic opportunities and, going against the European Union mainstream, sought closer political relations with China that also involved normative-ideological convergence. The “opening to the East” policy, announced in 2012, aimed at “end[ing] total dependence on capital inflows from the West” (China Continues to Show Interest in Hungary, With More Opportunities on the Horizon, BBJ n.d.), and implied geopolitical rebalancing in favor of closer relations with China, Russia, Turkey, and the Central Asian states. Consequently, Hungary was the first EU member to join the “Belt and Road Initiative” and has repeatedly vetoed EU resolutions condemning China’s human rights abuses or protectionist trade practices to symbolically and politically enhance its commitment to China—besides offering economic incentives in the form of record low corporate tax and decreasing tax burden on labor. Although to what extent the growing volume of Chinese investment in the country can be attributed to the political rapprochement in relation to other factors, such as its status as an EU entry gate and favorable logistical position, is questionable, Hungary has become

the largest destination of Chinese investment in Eastern Europe outside Russia since 2010 (McCaleb and Szunomár 2017; Karásková et al. 2020).

By the 2020s, Hungary emerged as the site of the first Chinese-financed and -executed railway construction project inside the EU (Liu 2023; Szabó and Jelinek 2024), one of the most contentious issues around which is the degree to which it will be based on Chinese rather than European technical standards.⁴ Similar questions are being raised about the large-scale Chinese-invested factories for electric car batteries, whose energy and water needs are reported to be extremely high. As investments of “strategic national importance,” they are exempted from most approval procedures, and their documentation is routinely classified. Local civil-society organizations’ and environmentalists’ concerns go unalleviated save for reassurance from the minister of foreign trade that they “have nothing to fear because Hungary’s environmental standards are far higher than Europe’s” (Judit 2023).

Besides its economic status as a strategic partner, Hungary has also acted as a regional hub of Chinese cultural and educational initiatives. In 2022, Orbán announced: “We don’t want our country to be trapped in the world of Western knowledge. We want to navigate successfully; what we need is language, knowledge, and culture, from China, Japan, and Korea as well” (Viktor Orbán’s announcement, 2022). In this spirit, the government announced plans to open a Fudan University campus in Budapest. The announcement was met with large-scale street protests against importing a “Communist university” (Sharma n.d.). While these plans may have been shelved, Hungary has five CIs. The largest, at Eötvös University, acts as a regional training center and has been awarded the title “Model Confucius Institute.” In sharp contrast to other EU member states where CIs have been shut down after attracting controversy as “submarines” (Sahlins 2015) of CCP interest,⁵ its director—who regularly appears on Chinese television—is the university’s vice-rector for international affairs, and its 15th anniversary was celebrated in the presence of high-ranking government officials (“15 éves az ELTE Konfuciusz Intézet”; ELTE Confucius Institute n.d.).

4 | Two Sets of Organizational Norms: The Parallel Worlds of CHBS

CHBS has always self-identified as an institution serving not one but several missions. The relative importance of its divergent missions has, however, shifted over time. Initially, CHBS was conceived to play a triple role: integrating Chinese children into the Hungarian education system while providing them with the means to “preserve their Chinese heritage and identity” (Sajtóiroda 2004), and teaching Chinese language and culture to Hungarian children. These purposes were conceived at the time of a brief flare-up of multiculturalism in Hungarian education policy and envisioned a mixed student body consisting of Chinese and Hungarian pupils, as well as children of other migration backgrounds, still defines the school, which offers both Chinese and Hungarian as native as well as second languages. Teachers are hired, students selected, buildings constructed, and rooms equipped to cater to these divergent purposes. These heterogeneous missions make the unidirectional idea of norm

propagation with clear casting of propagators and recipients multi-directional, leading to unexpected consequences. In this section, we explore how the convoluted missions embraced by CHBS have been reflected in its institutional makeup.

CHBS opened its doors to 87 pupils in September 2004, predating only 2 months the launching of the first official CI in South Korea. The initiative came from the Medgyessy government, which called it “a symbolic gesture that signals to international actors that Hungary welcomes foreign investors by creating the most favorable conditions possible” (Sajtóiroda 2004). For some time, the diplomatic significance of the school provided it immunity from the centralization of the Hungarian school system under the Orbán government’s illiberal transformation until its expansion to become a secondary school. The school could preserve its relative independence and autonomy by continuing as a separate entity even as other public schools, formerly run by local government, were placed under the authority of a single central organ, called the Klebelsberg School Operation Centre (KLIK), subsequently divided into school districts. However, the expansion from primary to secondary school in 2016 and the acquisition of a new building to accommodate it came at the price of losing this relative independence as operational rights and duties have been transferred to the central school district (Origo n.d.).

The intergovernmental agreement that laid the basis of the school stipulated that the Hungarian government functioned as the main operator and the school must comply with Hungarian education law, while the Chinese side, represented by Hanban (the State Office for the International Promotion of the Chinese Language, since renamed the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation, or CLEC, which also oversees CIs), is responsible for providing all resources for Chinese language learning, such as books and teachers. Chinese language classes at CHBS are mandatory for all enrolled students and are subject to the Hungarian national curriculum’s regulations concerning foreign language education. As such, “Chinese teachers are expected to tailor and adjust the material they receive [from Hanban/CLEC] to comply with the Hungarian expectations.”⁶ Hungarian law (Decree 4/2013. (I. 11.) issued by the Ministry for Human Resources) allows bilingual education schools to re-purpose up to 10% of subject hours for teaching “target language civilization,” which in practice means, for example, devoting 1–2 classes to Chinese calligraphy in art class. In addition, because of its status as a bilingual school, CHBS is also allowed to teach a special subject from K5 to K8 once a week which the Hungarian National Curriculum calls “target language civilization.” The purpose of this class is to “convey all necessary knowledge that wouldn’t fit other classes, such as eating with chopsticks or the national anthem of China.”⁷ Given its intricate missions, there is a certain ambiguity at CHBS regarding whether its “primary” and “target” language is Chinese or Hungarian, which is also related to the shifting proportions of its student population, which we will discuss below. Reflecting its ambiguous status, unlike the other subjects, it is not clear whether “target language civilization” is the responsibility of the Hungarian or the Chinese staff. A Hungarian teacher who gave this subject was himself uncertain about the details of his employment: first, he said he was hired by the Hungarian state and then realized that he may have been employed by Hanban.

The school’s official organizational structure reflects the hierarchy stipulated by law: while it formally divides the Hungarian and Chinese educators into two separate working groups headed by one Chinese and two Hungarian deputy principals (for K1–K6 and K7–K12), it places the Hungarian principal on the top, overseeing the whole institution. However, given the language barrier, all Chinese and China-related issues—including diplomatic visits and fundraising in addition to educational matters—are handled by the Chinese deputy principal. At the time of our research, CHBS had 15 Chinese teachers, supervised by a Chinese deputy principal, known by his Hungarian name, Uncle Józsi and referred to by Chinese teachers as “the Chinese principal” (*zhongfang xiaozhang* 中方校长).⁸ Uncle Józsi who came to Hungary in 1997 was recruited from the resident Chinese migrant population and has been serving in the position since the time of the school’s opening. Until 2020, Uncle Józsi was the point of contact between the principal and the Chinese teachers, who have little interaction with their Hungarian colleagues. During the coronavirus pandemic, however, Uncle Józsi, by then an elderly man, stopped coming to school, resulting in an even greater separation between the two groups and a lack of supervision of Chinese teachers. As the Principal said their working relationship and division of labor has been unproblematic, since Uncle Józsi was “well aware of local expectation towards education and teachers” and was “an ideal cooperating partner” in helping to adjust Chinese teachers to the local educational environment.⁹ At the same time, Uncle Józsi also shouldered and mediated all responsibilities that concerned expectations coming from the Chinese side, and administered the diplomatic work of delegation receptions—alleviating Principal Zsuzsanna from the burden of having to deal with differing institutional norms directly.

Chinese teachers are in charge of teaching mandatory Chinese language classes every day in group divisions (native, beginner, and advanced) in addition to teaching art and music. Most Chinese teachers (11) are dispatched from China by CLEC: an exceptionally high number even compared with most Confucius Institutes. In addition, at the time of our study, there were four teachers (in addition to Uncle Józsi) who had been recruited and employed locally and received significantly lower salaries. This means that the composition of Chinese teachers is heterogenous in itself: some came to Hungary in the early 1990s, others were sent by Hanban but secured a more permanent contract and have been in Hungary for over 10 years, yet others are on a 2-year tour of duty as CLEC’s normal procedure stipulates. (In principle, the 2-year term can be extended once, but some teachers make use of personal connections to secure longer extensions.) This variety of backgrounds and teaching experiences make for diversity in the ways teachers conceive and interpret their roles. While some Chinese teachers’ experience is restricted to teaching the native speaker group and have no contact with Hungarian students and teachers, others have longitudinal experience and are involved with the Hungarian half of the school.

The diversity of the student body is an important indicator of the hierarchical division among the distinct institutional missions. At the time of opening, over 90% of the pupils were Chinese.¹⁰ Unlike most public schools in Hungary, CHBS does not have a “catchment area” but is theoretically obliged to accept all Chinese applicants—though no official rule stipulates

this. The principal said, “Chinese students are obviously a priority, they will definitely be admitted because learning their mother tongue is important.”¹¹ However, over the past decade, the ratio of Chinese to Hungarian students has changed dramatically, and by 2010, it was fully reversed, with Hungarian pupils obtaining the absolute majority.¹² In an interview conducted in the 2007–2008 academic year, a Hungarian pupil said “he particularly enjoyed being the only Hungarian in class” (Ágoston 2009, 79), at the opening ceremony of the academic year 2022–2023, we observed that elementary school classes only had 1–2 Chinese students. Given that in the same period, according to data provided by the Hungarian Education Ministry, the overall enrolment by Chinese nationals in other Hungarian public schools has almost tripled, this tendency is unexpected. Principal Zsuzsanna Erdélyi interprets this trend as a reflection of increased popular interest from Hungarian families, driven by close relations between the two countries and the growing value of Chinese language skills as a tool for future mobility. However, a former deputy principal says it reflects Chinese parents’ dissatisfaction instead. She claims to have conducted a “mini-research” and found that Chinese parents found the school’s language training unsatisfactory in all aspects: Chinese pupils did not acquire Hungarian as a mother tongue (as they would have at a normal public school), nor did they master a proper level of Chinese literacy (as they would have at a weekend school for Chinese children) but also did not learn nearly enough English (as they would have at a private international school).¹³

A third cause has been implied by some teachers who left the school due to the changes implemented by the new deputy principal who is in charge of overseeing high school affairs, and whose arrival coincided with the school’s transfer to the Central School District. These teachers argued that this deputy principal propelled the school toward absolute compliance with the “Christian conservative” norms propagated by the Hungarian government and suggested that this resulted in a less welcoming attitude toward Chinese children—especially those with significant language barriers. Given the Hungarian National Curriculum’s general ignorance concerning immigrant children, Chinese pupils tend to bring down

grade averages, which in turn diminishes the institution’s reputation in the School District. This suggests that the School District emerged as a stronger incentive for enforcing compliance, gradually overpowering the school’s original missions. The school thus completely abandoned its original agenda of training Chinese pupils for transnationalism (Nyíri 2014). Instead, its diplomatic mission shifted to raising Hungarians who fit the Chinese government’s image of “foreign friends” (Brady 2002).

The school’s diplomatic function is manifested in its physical environment and everyday life. Unlike most public schools in Hungary, this one is spacious, neat, and functional, with minimal decoration that largely conforms to what Jennifer Hubbert (2019, 28) calls “traditional patriotic state culture.” Entering the school gate, the visitor finds himself/herself facing an enormous school emblem (the Chinese character *zhong* 中, filled on the left with the Hungarian flag and on the right with the Chinese flag) behind an impressive stage, under a ceiling adorned with lanterns. The school’s Chinese identity also finds visual expression in bilingual signs from a pointer to the cafeteria to all information on the bulletin board.

Standing in stark contrast with the puritanical space of the entry hall, the “sponsors’ wall” is especially conspicuous, covered as it is in gold-plated gigantic cheques of vibrant colors. Although the Chinese government officially does not contribute to the school’s finances apart from the Ambassadorial Scholarship (about which later), donations play an important role in making the school’s infrastructure visibly stand out from the crowd of Hungary’s moldering public institutions. Since the direct donation of money to the school is prohibited by Hungarian legislation, willing donors need to find a particular purpose for their donations, such as the construction of a playground, a language lab, the installation of a control and surveillance system—or a room dedicated for tea ceremony. These directed investments thus not only contribute to better conditions or better equipment in general but produce a physical environment that at once enforces gratitude and is in the position to shape how that gratitude is expressed by stimulating the type of activities that would take place in them.



Building the Bridge of Friendship Among the Two Nations.¹⁴

Donations also offer an opportunity for Chinese companies to express their patriotism, and no new investment by a Chinese company in Hungary goes by without a plaque on the sponsors' wall ("Fióktelepet nyitott Magyarországon a China Construction Bank," ProfitLine n.d.). Donors range from the Chinese reality show *Where Are We Going, Daddy?*, several episodes of which were filmed in Hungary, to the Wanhua chemical company, until recently the largest Chinese investor in the country, with the most generous donation coming from the Bank of China, which contributed €190,000.¹⁵ Donations are also used in part for occasional presents to teachers. Ilona, a former teacher and multicultural trainer who strongly subscribes to the democratic educational paradigm, expressed her appreciation for these gestures: "To the Chinese embassy, it occurred to appreciate a bit those miserable teachers at Christmas, send a bottle of wine and a [pastry]. Do you know what we got from the school district? Zero, nothing. In China, there is still some prestige and respect toward educators." In this context, the Chinese state appears as the caring, good master that makes up for the shortcomings of the ignorant and tight-fisted Hungarian state. This makes Ilona, a politically active liberal, to evaluate the appearance of Chinese delegations at the school as something "normal," that is appropriate to the norms of decency, rather than objectionable or at odds with the school's "free-spirited" atmosphere: "The Chinese state supports this school in a *very normal* manner. So, if a delegation came and someone gave say a ten-minute speech, he was *very normal* [sic] and brought three projectors and who knows how many computers for the kids. So, [the Chinese state is] very caring."¹⁶ The cost-benefit calculation implied by Ilona suggests that the 10 min of listening to propaganda is a small price to pay for durable equipment that serves open-ended educational purposes.

Interestingly, all self-identified liberal educators reasoned the school's democratic decline was due to changes in the Hungarian education system rather than pressure from China. Most of these teachers have left the school in recent years after the school has been co-opted by the School District. As Ilona put it:

With the school becoming an institution of the School District, the atmosphere of the entire school began to change ... One of those typical School-District deputy principals appeared, who is like "*not only do we comply with all laws and regulations, but we also even impose on ourselves regulations that are 100 times stricter.*" And this is the cause behind the slow but continuous evaporation of the magic that I was fortunate enough to experience.¹⁷

As earlier quotations revealed, Ilona had been quite content with the presence of the Chinese state in the school—she considered it a good bargain in exchange for all the "magic" the setup otherwise conferred. She did not see compliance enforced by the Chinese side as compromising the school's principles, but as a temporary and limited imposition not touching what she finds important. Standing in sharp contrast with this image of the Chinese state as the good master—generous but not

intrusive—emerges the School District represented by the new deputy principal, who embodies all that a truly liberal-minded educator can only disdain: total and mindless control, without room for individual autonomy. As such, the convergence of authoritarian institutional norms has been experienced as endogenous and incidental rather than exogenous pressure from the Chinese side.

5 | Entangling Institutional and Educational Norms: Staging Gratitude at CHBS

What makes CHBS particularly apposite for norms transmission is its inherent diplomatic function, which turns school calendar events into foreign policy affairs. The recurring appearance of notable political figures from both Hungary and China brings heightened expectations for compliance in both directions. Unlike at other public schools, visual references to Hungary are absent in the lobby but it has a spacious meeting room adorned in embassy style with flags and national symbols, large leather armchairs, and an enormous oval conference table. Such a room only makes sense for a school that regularly welcomes high-ranking visitors such as Péter Sijjártó, the Hungarian minister of foreign trade, Xi Jinping himself, who visited the school in 2009 as vice-chairman, or then Vice-Premier Li Keqiang in 2012, and Chinese first lady Peng Liyuan with her Hungarian counterpart Anikó Lévai in 2024. The eminent guests were greeted with student performances ranging from Chinese dance and songs to poetry recitations. The principal commented in a public interview: "With the performance, we send a message to Vice-Premier Li that we are educating the next generation of Chinese and Hungarians who are assimilating each other's cultures, (...) who will become the backbone of a lasting Chinese–Hungarian friendship."¹⁸ Since it is a group of Hungarians who perform kung fu and tai chi—instead of Chinese students performing Hungarian cultural acts—assimilation is presented in a decidedly unidirectional manner. These performances are designed to please the Chinese masters by expressing devotion by performing a mimicry of "traditional patriotic" culture.

Official visits require not only preparation; gratitude is expected to be expressed afterwards, too. A former Chinese teacher, Qianwei, described the recording of a video message after a visit by Vice-Premier Liu Yandong:

I was assigned to write the students' "heartfelt words" to Premier Liu Yandong, and I racked my brain for a long time and finally wrote, "Premier Liu, thank you for your last visit. You are welcome to come to Budapest again sometime." The Chinese teacher who was in charge of the recording said that there was no emotion in it, and I said that my speech had degenerated to the primitive stage, so I should ask her to revise it. That day when I was recording the students with my cell phone, it felt like we were playing a comedy, with the students facing the camera and reciting the revised script "Dear Grandma Prime Minister, we miss you so



Performing Chineseness.¹⁹

much! Do you remember the painting we sent to you? I will learn Chinese language and culture well and hope to see you again in Beijing in the future!” On the way home from the recording, I suddenly felt that we were despicable, teaching our students to say things they don’t mean, teaching them how to flatter authority, but I was a coward, I couldn’t do anything different.²⁰

Here, Qianwei thus highlights, and criticizes, the school’s function to train teachers and pupils in the unwritten linguistic and embodied norms of performing obedience to figures of authority, which she sees as false and corrupting (cf. Barmé 1999). It is worth recalling, however, that her Hungarian colleague Ilona identified shifts in Hungarian political norms rather than imposition from China as the source of this corrupting influence.

Before the Covid pandemic, official visits were more frequent, sometimes several a month, and preparing for them took up much of the Chinese teachers’ time. However, as the pandemic has shown, the presence of delegations is temporary in nature, thus revealing the situational nature of compliance. For example, the school celebrations of national holidays can be very different depending on whether there is a delegation visit. Indeed, most teachers we spoke to attribute very little significance to these ceremonies staged to please diplomatic visitors. While Hungarian national days (of which there are three) have been celebrated conscientiously, during the past years amidst the pandemic preventing practically all visitations, the celebration of 1 October, the PRC’s state holiday, has been side-lined and reduced to a short radio address by the principal, and a movie shown in class. As the principal explained,

Obviously, things take a different turn if a delegation is here. We need to celebrate *the Chinese way*. If a Chinese guest comes, we also wave flags—even if in Hungary that is quite funny. We need to *respect* this, it is part of their culture. I always mention this to [Hungarian] parents, they should be aware that this

is also a part of it before enrolling their children. If someone can’t accept this, they shouldn’t bring their child here because conflicts will surely arise from it.²¹

As this quotation suggests, compliance with the “Chinese way” is only necessary under certain circumstances and discursively relies on the assumption that Chinese politics (greeting authoritarian rule) is equivalent to Chinese culture. Showing a film on 1 October may be seen as an energy-efficient and “safe” solution for dealing with the PRC’s state holiday, yet it opens room for the reproduction of Chinese state nationalism in formats that clash with avowed norms of teaching in Hungary, going down in a strikingly unproblematic way. For instance, one Chinese teacher showed her students the nationalistic action blockbuster *Wolf Warrior* and the animated cartoon *The Return of the Great Sage*. Another teacher, Qianwei, who has since left the school, commented:

I was a bit surprised. *Wolf* is supposed to be for adults, and *The Return of the Great Sage* is an animated film, but the pictures are actually a bit violent. I think Hungary also has a film rating system, right? [The colleague who showed these pictures] asked me what I had shown to my students, and I said we only watched two short, animated films, *The Present* and *Alike*, and she said meaningfully, “Those are *foreign* films.” I may not have the sense of responsibility to “promote Chinese culture” (which is why I often doubt whether I am suitable for this job).²²

As this quotation and her later decision to leave the school suggest, Qianwei perceived herself as not living up to the expectations expressed by her colleagues, especially with regard to performing her role as a true patriot, because of lacking “the sense of responsibility to ‘promote Chinese culture’.” She was troubled by what she saw as her colleagues’ inadequate understanding of children and sensitivity to their needs and potential and refused to comply with the expectations toward her role as a norm propagator, resulting in her ostracism by other teachers.

Yet, her colleague—who had no such sensitivity toward children's psychological needs, as her film choices indicate—could perform this patriotic mission without any dissent from either the Hungarian parents or teachers.

What makes the 1 October celebration particularly intriguing is that, under Hungarian law, the five-pointed red star is banned as a “symbol of despotism” (Hungarian Criminal Code, 2012, § 335), and “publicly denying the crimes of Communism” is an offense punishable by up to 3 years in prison (Hungarian Criminal Code, 2012, § 333). Furthermore, 23 October, the anniversary of the 1956 uprising that briefly brought down Communist rule, is a Hungarian state holiday that all schools mark and has been a defining element in Hungarian nationalism. The school, and the children, deal with diametrically opposite politics of memory in such close sequence by downplaying their political and moral normative content. As a Hungarian teacher put it, “It’s [1 October] is like every other festivity: no one really knows what we celebrate, it’s a Chinese holiday and that’s it. We respect that, celebrate that, and that’s it—no political content whatsoever, it’s perfectly *cultural*.” Just like Principal Zsuzsanna, this teacher, while using culture as an antonym for politics in her narrative, subsumes authoritarian politics as a cultural subcategory and thus is able to interpret a profoundly political act as “cultural.”

The program on these occasions is a performance for visitors. In the teacher’s words, they are the same thing over and over again and “over time become freaking boring.”²³ Even in the last pre-pandemic year, when 1 October was celebrated in the presence of the ambassador, his speeches avoided all but the most general references to “China’s birthday.” As a Chinese teacher commented, “Someone who came in the middle could have thought it was the school’s birthday.” The choice of songs performed by the children, too, reflected a desire to depoliticize: while the song “National Flag, National Flag, Really Beautiful” was kept in the program, “Today is Your Birthday, My Fatherland” was proposed but removed, apparently because Uncle Józsi considered the wording injudicious. When a Chinese teacher asked Hungarian students what they knew about this holiday, they replied that all they knew it was China’s national holiday. Some added that they were not interested in politics.

Another instance of the school’s diplomatic function is the Ambassadorial scholarship, which is a one-time grant of 200,000 forints (around €500), handed over every year by China’s ambassador, usually as the highlight of the New Year festival. In 2023, the event we visited was attended by three attachés from the Chinese embassy and the president of the School District was also invited to the event. The invitation and warm welcome of the School District director were surprising against the background of the large-scale protests by teachers directed precisely at school districts and their directors taking place at the same time. Principal Zsuzsanna prided herself in that “from [her] school,” no teachers participated in the nationwide strikes and demonstrations against Central School Districts, and indeed, teachers welcomed the School District president with polite clapping instead of using this opportunity for showcasing dissent. It appeared that, as much Chinese politics was dismissed by way of disguising it as “culture,” Hungarian politics—the freedom to strike and of assembly—was erased with it as well.

Students, just like the distinguished guests, performed their roles as little diplomats: suits buttoned up to the chin, speeches read out from papers—no improvisation or playfulness the school environment could allow for. The speeches adhered pedantically to officially approved diplomatic formulas about Chinese–Hungarian friendship and the mandatory expressions of admiration for Chinese culture and gratitude to the PRC which “allow[ed them] to pursue their deep-rooted interest in studying the great Chinese culture and master Chinese language even more.”²⁵ The well-groomed “foreign friends” thus showcased indisputable fluency in “official Chinese” (*guanhua* 官话), and thereby engaged in the “ritual production of political compliance” (Hansen 2017).

6 | Educational Norms: An Awkward Coexistence

In the previous section, we discussed the staged and enforced but ultimately ephemeral articulations of Chinese institutional norms that exist in parallel to Hungarian ones. In this section, we turn to the mundane, everyday experiences of teaching and learning, which, given their temporal span, arguably contribute more to subject-making in terms of norm formation. We show how the convergence and disjuncture between two sets of (transforming) educational norms play out,



We celebrate both Hungarian and Chinese holidays.²⁴

and how the school conforms to China's storytelling agenda via pedagogical norms—involving both the style and the content of education. We find that compliance with Chinese educational norms far exceeds the expectations from the Chinese side, and challenges to the mainstream narrative appear only in private conversations. This stands in great contrast with research conducted at a US high school Confucius Classroom, where attempts to transmit China's public relations agenda failed and instead reinforced China's image as a “crazy tyranny” (Hubbert 2019, 122). In the Hungarian setting, even self-described liberal teachers saw over-articulated expressions of “goodtelling China's story” or other manifestations of Chinese patriotic culture as “normal.”

This normalization results in part from the widespread assumption, mostly endorsed by Hungarian informants (teachers, students and parents alike) that the Chinese and the Hungarian side of the school are two parallel universes with close to no contact. The Chinese deputy principal maintains diplomatic relations with the Chinese embassy, controls and supervises the work of Chinese teachers, who in turn deal with Chinese parents, handle Chinese enrolments, and teach Chinese students. Chinese teachers have a separate teachers' room and organize their social outings separately. They only meet their Hungarian colleagues at school functions, but even here—such as at a Christmas dinner—they form separate groups. Chinese teachers see their place of work from the perspective of Hanban's global network, as an entity at a level equal to a CI and thus above the “Confucius classrooms” embedded at other schools outside China.

This conception of parallel coexistence extends to pedagogical norms and teaching practices as well. These accounts, embraced by all of our participants, view educational norms as mirroring innate cultural differences, which are unchanging, coherent and discrete (Abu-Lughod 1996). Different participants attributed different meanings to this separation. The more liberal-minded teachers interpreted it as the Chinese government's non-interference and emphasized their appreciation for it. One teacher even described the early years of the school as the “most liberal environment [she had] ever worked in.” This teacher, Ilona, who had served as a district assemblywoman for a liberal party, explicitly stated: “In this school the Chinese state behaves as if it were an international school, meaning that I haven't experienced any sort of terror or repression. If there has been any, it was directed exclusively at Uncle Józsi,” she added with a laugh. “When a bigger delegations came, the poor man got so skinny, got completely broken—under constant command regarding with whom, when and how to talk about what ... He was terrified.” This suggests that to her, the neat division of labor meant that infringements on freedoms were restricted to the Chinese half, while the Hungarian half could enjoy untroubled freedom, and taken together, this was a deal worth making. “This school used to be so free-spirited and open-minded as if it were an American school and not a Chinese one.”²⁶ In its early years, the globalist-cosmopolitan agenda of the school indeed attracted a disproportionate number of liberal educators such as Ilona.

A good example is a former deputy principal, Móni, who embarked on a self-appointed mission of promoting the school

out of a firm belief that it was a great cradle for raising a generation of cosmopolitan-minded global citizens. She therefore actively sought out and accepted all kinds of media invitations from mainstream Hungarian media outlets, local Chinese media outlets, and international media as well. She even landed a piece in the *New York Times* (Dempsey 2010), and as such became a proactive “goodteller” of China's story—albeit out of completely different considerations and with ambiguous results. In her eager pursuit to present the school on an international stage as an innovative experiment for multicultural education, she stumbled upon a call for proposals on children's rights by the Canadian embassy. As she recalls, it didn't even cross her mind that advocating for children's rights could be controversial in this setting. When we asked her whether this caused any tensions at the school either with parents or teachers in terms of the startlingly different educational norms, she paused for a while, thinking heavily. Finally, she said no one cared much, apart from one of the older, locally recruited Chinese teachers who told her that she should not be pushing this project too far given that “in China, children have no rights.” But no one had tried to prevent her from pursuing these initiatives, despite the subsequent media coverage that portrays the school as a cradle for liberal democratic values. She also brought Chinese students to the award ceremony to represent the school.²⁷

The current principal also endorsed a view of educational norms as mirroring innate cultural differences, but unlike self-identified liberals who appreciated peaceful coexistence and non-interference, she was more eager to express her admiration of the Chinese style of rote learning what she calls the technique of “deep ingraining.” Echoing Orbán, she emphasizes the efficiency of “Eastern knowledge” thereby implying the impotence of the declining West:

Native Chinese pupils are taught by the classic method, just like in China: same book, same method—and look, it works. And this is the parental expectation. Hungarian students, on the other hand, are taught by completely different methods, fun and interactive ... It's fine, but ... Well, it definitely doesn't work as efficiently as ‘deep ingraining.’ I saw that with my own eyes. I've sat in a first-grade class, and by the end of the class, all students knew the material. What can you say to that?²⁸

Although the method of rote learning and the power distance it implies is usually perceived in Western education as an outdated and authoritarian method, the principal clearly favors this approach and indeed laments that Hungarian students are excluded from its benefits. With its emphasis on efficiency, the principal adopts a utilitarian-pragmatic, instrumentally rationalized approach to education, and thus departs from the ground of Western educational consensus that sees inherent value in children's joyful and enriching learning process. Going under the buzzword of “happy education,” ironically, this is exactly the educational approach which has been gaining popularity in the PRC during the past decade, even to the point of becoming an important trigger for migration

among middle-class families who hope to provide this for their children in unlikely places, such as Hungary (Beck and Nyíri 2022; Beck and Gaspar 2024).

By invoking “parental expectations,” the principal expands the realm of difference from education practices to parents, and by implication to the ethnic group. “Chinese parents do not challenge the school; they see the kids off saying ‘Learn as much as you can’. Hungarian parents see them off saying ‘Have fun!’ That is a great difference.”²⁹ Notably, this account posits both Chinese and Hungarian parents and teachers as separate, homogenous, coherent, and unchanging cultures, associating both with an inherent set of norms and values. Although the statement contains the principal’s normative preferences, which coincide with those of the Hungarian government, she nonetheless implies that they cannot be implemented among Hungarian pupils.

This view that links educational norms to innate cultural differences was best expressed by a Hungarian couple who have three children at the school. Both parents are active members of the school community, with the father serving as president of the school’s Parents’ Association (PA) for over a decade. The couple are convinced that Chinese teachers adopt different teaching methods and educational norms when teaching students in the native Chinese language class compared with when dealing with Hungarian pupils: not only do Chinese pupils have a heavier workload and stricter expectations, but also the teachers even “break sticks” to enforce student performance, whereas they are very permissive when it comes to Hungarian students. For them, just like for the principal, this was an object of envy rather than concern: they thought their children’s progress would have benefitted from “real Chinese” education. They were disappointed by the school “not being as Chinese” as they had hoped it to be. “Having been raised as a soldier’s son,” the dad elaborated, “I have conservative views and strongly favor strict and hierarchical pedagogy.” The mother jumped in to say she hoped the school would:

convey traditional Chinese values such as respect and a more collectivistic approach. I really admire this “one for all, all for one” nature of Chinese thinking, the respect for the elderly, and respect for education—I would have liked it if they learned these values in school. I really don’t like this individualistic culture in which we live, and I hoped this school would not be that kind of absolutely liberal ... Well, I have to say I’m very disappointed.

As if they had been appointed ambassadors of “goodtelling China’s story,” these Hungarian parents have been pushing hard with the Parents’ Association to introduce more “traditional culture” in the official curriculum in the form of arts, music, and sports, such as calligraphy or kung fu, to no avail.³⁰ They also concluded that Chinese parents are a “closed community” and rarely attend to school-related issues, hindering the agenda of turning the school to be “more Chinese.” None of their children made friends with Chinese classmates, because “Chinese children also tend to stick together.” The strong divide they

perceived also suggests the failure of the original multicultural conception, theoretically leaving no space for interweaving between the two sets of educational norms. Yet, in practice, the indigenous and exogenous convergence between the two has practically leveled them.

Although the principal supports what she perceives as the Chinese educational method and attitude toward teaching, she sees the other side of the coin when it comes to her relationship with the Chinese teachers:

Chinese teachers would do anything you ask them to—but not creatively, to put it mildly. For example, on a project day: with Hungarian teachers, we only outline things in broad brushes, who does what, we brainstorm and put the project together collectively. With Chinese teachers, if we try the same, there is like silence. (...) If everything is prescribed, they execute it perfectly, they are very humble and hard-working. But brainstorming is not their thing—they haven’t been trained for that. They are trained to do as they are told—they don’t need to think, just execute the ready-made plan. We did try to incentivise them, but it was a grand failure.³¹

While the principal’s narrative suggests the same essentializing cultural view of education by attributing the Chinese teachers’ lack of creativity, autonomy, and incentive to their different socialization, in reality, the “silence” observed by the principal may be due to the fact that Chinese teachers have hardly any contact with her and are unsure about who their superior is and where their duties belong to.

Other Hungarian teachers, like Ilona, see a great variety in teaching styles among their Chinese colleagues, very much depending on age, as Ilona saw it. “There was this lovely young woman, with whom I talked about the kids every time before her class—she in English, me in Hungarian. She had a lovely teaching style, very playful—so there were positive examples.” What was more interesting is her encounter with the “typical rigid” Chinese teaching style:

[...] Then a middle-aged woman came, who was totally freaked out by my class. She even went to the principal’s office and said that she was going home to China (...). [She said] these children are crazy! (There were 6–8 children in her group.) They talk interrupt the class, make faces, eat and drink—(...) she came out of the class crying, throwing tantrums, yelling, and all that. And then she asked me to change my schedule so that I could sit in as many of her classes as possible. And I did, I disciplined the children for her, sat them down, kicked them under the bench [laughs]. Urging them to listen, put up their hands, etc. In the end, we managed to build a better relationship, but she was that kind of typical rigid Chinese teacher. It mattered to her what angle

the child held his/her hand up ... Well, she was used to teaching 60 kids at the same time—there is not a single sound, no sassiness. These older teachers, who were trained there—this system drove them crazy ...³²

Acting as a mediator between different educational cultures, although she expresses her disagreement with this particular teacher's problems and methods (e.g., the exaggeration of the angle of the arm), instead of making the Chinese teacher comply, she becomes the one who complies with her, by voluntarily playing the role of the “disciplinarian.”

Incidentally, Qianwei recalled her shock when she saw some Hungarian children sitting in class with arms folded, a practice she associated with China. She was dismayed when she saw a Chinese colleague order a pupil to wipe the blackboard and sympathized with Chinese pupils scolded by their teacher. She disapproved of some Chinese teachers' emphasis on competitiveness and tests and their equation of test scores with intelligence. Rather than gradually adapting to these practices like Ilona, her resistance to them resulted in increasing tensions with her Chinese colleagues and seeking alliances with Hungarian staff such as Ilona. This, in turn, generated more animosity on the side of other Chinese teachers who accused her of complaining about them to the Hungarians. Eventually, this led to ostracism by other Chinese staff, precipitating her decision not to apply to extend her initial 2-year term.

Another Chinese teacher who has taught at the school for over 10 years reported a contrasting trend. She explained how much her attitude toward the Hungarian educational style has changed since she first arrived as a fresh graduate. She recalled her initial shock by the liveliness and noisiness of Hungarian students, but unlike the other Chinese teacher, she did not invite disciplinary help. She decided to accommodate to students' dispositions instead. In a self-reflective manner, she rationalized how her own experience as a child had shaped her methods as an educator, and how the difference in circumstances called for different practices: “In China, you have to be one of some 70 students, and the only socially accepted way to stand out is through your scores.” Besides disciplinary standards, she also noted how obsession with scores and grading as the most important goal of education was also something she left behind and learned to appreciate the freedoms brought about by less pressure. Her compliance with the liberal norms originally embraced by the school did not stand in her way of renewing her status well beyond the original 2-year contract, or did it lead to her exclusion from the body of Chinese teachers.³³

As the cases reviewed in this section testify, despite the rigid categorization of two antagonistic sets of educational norms endorsed by most participants, in practice what we see is an ever-greater convergence from both sides. While Hungarian educational practices are getting more austere amidst the increasing efforts to be in full compliance with ever more rigid Hungarian educational law and the general naturalization of illiberal norms (Orbán 2015), many of the Chinese teachers either freshly arrive equipped with more “progressive,”

child-centered teaching methods given the changing expectations in the mainland (Friedman 2023), or accustom themselves to the newly emerging trend here, in Hungary. As such, compliance happens out of indigenous processes that are as economic as political.

7 | Civic Norms: Avoiding “Sensitive Issues”

The issue of “sensitive topics” is an obvious focus of attention when analyzing whether and how an institution transmits civic norms that prevail in the PRC. Focusing on these issues reveals how the school approaches the questions of free speech and freedom of opinion, and how educators themselves deal with them in practice. Indeed, research conducted at CIs in so-called developed countries centers around these questions. However, both Hungary's education system and its information environment are conducive to de-emphasizing the importance of contentious issues. As noted above, K-12 education has since 2010 moved toward presenting a single authoritative narrative and away from encouraging debate. Moreover, state-controlled media, which dominate the information space, present a favorable image of China as an efficiently governed, prosperous country, and steer away from political issues (Karásková et al. 2018; Index 2011).

Ilona's apt assessment of the practice of replacing politics with culture, as if the two were somehow interchangeable categories, intuitively strikes the core of one of the CCP's main strategies for correcting its image. Unlike the more explicit and often offensive discourse embraced by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in promoting the merits of Xi Jinping, a more subtle strategy of “goodtelling” China's story adopted in this context is a discursive maneuver that attempts to shift the limelight from *politics* to *culture* and *language*. The idea is to speak less—or even better not at all—about the vast array of “sensitive” topics such as human rights and territorial issues, Tibet, the Uyghurs, Taiwan, or Hong Kong and discuss depoliticized and decontextualized elements of “traditional patriotic culture” such as paper cutting, tea ceremony, or dragon dance instead.

History, a subject that might serve telling China's story “right,” is the responsibility of Hungarian staff and hews to the Hungarian national curriculum, just like literature and geography. Nonetheless, a history teacher admitted that “the 20th century does indeed pose a challenge.” Upon inquiring into what is his strategy for coping with this challenge, he said:

There is a curriculum, that states what topics need to be discussed, and I simply tell that. I do have opinions—but opinion is a whole different matter. I tell about Mao, the havoc and destruction the Cultural Revolution entailed, cleansing within the Party, these topics need to be discussed. About Taiwan, my strategy is to introduce different standpoints considering Taiwan, I tell which parts of the world subscribe to which standpoint, how much of the world is on China's side in this question, and that there are countries that stand beside Taiwan, and that there is a tension between the US and China. But my opinion

about, say, communism—I tell that in relation to Hungarian history [laughs].³⁴

This teacher, then, steers clear of discussing China's political system and justifies his choices by referring to the Hungarian national curriculum. Indicating the effectiveness of his strategy, he has so far been selected three times for trips to China which is generally seen as the greatest perk available to a teacher at the school.

Another option for challenging “China’s story” would be the subject “target language civilization” (TLC), a special entitlement of bilingual schools. László, a former TLC teacher we interviewed—who was uncertain whether he was employed by the Chinese or the Hungarian state—is proud to have a Chinese studies degree from a Hungarian university and a diploma in teaching from Peking University and is now employed by a Hungarian government-run China research outfit. When we asked László about his strategy for dealing with sensitive topics, he said:

I only have memories of, like, very, very indirect incidents, nothing explicit, really. I was there during the pandemic, which occupied pretty much all of our thoughts. There wasn't yet a war between Russia and Ukraine, so these [geopolitical] questions didn't have relevance then. We were primarily concerned with protecting ourselves against the pandemic.

Thus, László, whose career has been tied to Hungary's current authoritarian government and its increasingly tight relationship with China, did not acknowledge that any controversial questions might come up in his class. Rather, he quickly shifted our conversation to the “fight against pandemic”—interpreted as a more central issue that mitigates the importance of questions of human rights and freedom of expression.³⁵

Despite concerted efforts to steer clear of controversy, incidents do happen. One reason for this is that the school has a few Taiwanese students. The principal told us of a fight between two high school students over the question of Taiwan. In a Chinese language class, Taiwan was mentioned as part of China, to which a Taiwanese boy raised his objections. The teacher, “instead of addressing the issue and starting a dialogue, simply repressed the topic and requested students to move on. And then in the break, the boys took the matter into their own hands and opted for a physical manner to settle the issue on the corridor.”³⁶ According to the principal, upon realizing what was going on, Uncle Józsi rushed to the scene and calmed the boys down by saying “come on boys, in this school we believe that both parties can be right. At the end of the day, we are *all* Chinese, we *all* speak Chinese—let's focus on that instead.” Uncle Józsi's strategy of pacifying the adversaries by appealing to their common national belonging follows the homogenizing vision of (implicitly Han) Chinese culture that trumps all diversity (Vickers 2022). The same normalization of Chinese state nationalism takes place through language teaching. Thus, a Chinese teacher observed that whenever she asked her Hungarian pupils to write a sentence with the character 国 (*guo*, country), most wrote “I want to

go to China,” “I want to study in China,” or “China is beautiful,” as if understanding that this was expected of them. Yet when she asked them to give a presentation, in Chinese, on a country they liked, none chose China. She concluded that while they had been taught to associate “China” with “big” and “beautiful” they had developed little personal connection to it. In another instance, a visibly upset Chinese teacher angrily complained to her colleagues that a Hong Kong pupil in her class called Hong Kong a country. Yet, in public, the Chinese teachers, even more than the Hungarian history teacher, clearly complied with the mandate dictated by “good-telling” China's story—by not speaking about it at all. But, unlike in the American Confucius classroom setting described by Hubbert, Hungarian teachers, and students accepted this strategy without any attempts to challenge it.

8 | Student Outcomes: The Chinese Democrat and the Compliant Hungarian

The ultimate arbiters of the success of norm transmission are the school's graduates. Therefore, in this final section, we conclude with the portraits of Yifan and Izabella, two graduating students of the class of 2023, recognized as exemplars of success: popular among teachers and peers, and recipients of ambassadorial scholarships. Their stories reveal the self-contradictory and rather counterintuitive nature of multidirectional norm appropriation and compliance. For Yifan, a Chinese student who arrived at the school with substantial schooling experience in China, CHBS appeared as a haven of freedom for self-actualization. Izabella, on the other hand, has been enrolled at CHBS from Grade 1 and has no basis for comparison. For her, complying with authoritarian educational norms has been the foundational capital on which she builds her future strategically.

Yifan arrived in Hungary at the age of 14 and entered CHBS as a 7th grader. For him, the school fulfilled its original mission and indeed provided integration into Hungarian society: he mastered the language in an astonishingly short time and integrated into school life quickly. According to most Hungarian teachers, his case represents the exception rather than the rule, as most Chinese pupils who arrive at an older age rarely become fluent in Hungarian. Yifan boasts a colorful circle of friends including a Hungarian girlfriend, thus defying most stereotypes about Chinese students at the school. He recalls his experience of the shift between the two educational systems:

You know, back in China, I didn't have time to do anything, I had to study all the time. And I had no idea at all what the world looks like, how it works, I only knew it from books—and you know, those books are written by the Chinese state. Here I have enough time to discover my own passion and interest, which is international politics. And the information I can access from here really puts the things I've read in China in a different perspective

....³⁷



Letter Handover Ceremony.⁴⁰

Representing a rather novel child character amidst China's transforming familial relations (Naftali 2016; Beck and Nyíri 2022), Yifan presents himself as an emancipated and autonomous person of his own, both in the setting of the school and the family. Notable in his account is the centrality of free time that appears as the precursor of his personal freedoms and striving. Yifan has been eager to live with his newly gained freedoms indeed: he is active in the school's social life, maintaining excellent—one could say diplomatic—relations with both his teachers and peers and is purposefully preparing for a career as a Hungarian politician. In his perception, freedom—the most important of democratic values—is a decisive characteristic of the school. His affinity for democratic ideals became apparent as he enthusiastically shared his fondest school memory: his participation in the student presidential election.

Student presidency is a relatively new tradition in Hungarian high schools, starting in the wake of democratization in 1989, as a joyful way of cultivating civil rights and duties in a newly formed democracy. Although schools can adopt different forms of student elections, most let candidates campaign for a couple of weeks before “Students’ Day,” when all school affairs are handed over to the democratically elected student president. Yifan did an excellent job in designing and campaigning with the program, and with the support of his peers won the election confidently. Now he is occupied by the upcoming graduation exams. Yifan has clearly outlined plans for the future, and as such, only applied to one university: the National University of Public Service of Budapest, Hungary, to study international relations. Given his outstanding grades, this is not a matter of contingency, but of agentive choice. For now, he considers Hungary his home and has no intention to move forward to another country, and even less so to move back to China, where he will only return “as a tourist, or out of emergency.” To conclude, for Yifan, a student who arrived from the Chinese educational environment, the school was more “Hungarian” in the sense that it embodied the educational norms associated with a generically defined West, mostly related to rights, freedom, and democracy—norms that middle-class Hungarians perceive the public education system to be sorely lacking (Márton 2018).

In contrast, the school also produces what might be described as thoroughly Sinicized Hungarian subjects, who perform full compliance with Chinese norms. The most illustrative example is provided by Izabella, a Hungarian graduating student, who strategically performs compliance for pragmatic and self-interested purposes: gaining acceptance to a Chinese university. Izabella enrolled at the school 12 years ago, at the age of 7, because “[her] mother thought Chinese was a world language, and as such, it would be very beneficial for [her] future.” By the time of her enrolment, the student ratio had already been reversed, with Hungarian students forming a majority. Izabella outcompeted her peers in learning Chinese and made it to the small native language group in K10. As most of her Chinese groupmates, like Yifan, Izabella took an early graduation exam in Chinese in K11, which liberated her from mandatory Chinese classes in the last grade. But unlike Yifan, who used this as an opportunity to repurpose this time for studying for other exams, she still attends Chinese classes: “I don’t receive grades or anything, this is purely informal, but since this is what I want to work with in the future, I still go to classes.”³⁸ This added to the long list of proofs of her “tireless dedication toward learning the Chinese language”—a quality that recurrently defines students at CHBS as worthy of scholarships, road trips to China, and so on.

The eminent graduating student seized the opportunity of having been rewarded with the Ambassadorial scholarship to write a letter to Chairman Xi Jinping to thank him for the opportunity to “learn Chinese out of a determination to contribute to China-Hungary friendship.” In our interview, Izabella admitted that the idea came from her teachers—both the Hungarian principal and her Chinese teacher, who encouraged her to write the letter. Since she had already thanked “Mr. Chairman” in her speech at the award ceremony and expressed her warm feelings toward him along with her genuine determination to study Chinese to “strengthen the bridge between the two countries,” turning it into a letter required no effort. When the school received Xi’s response, in which he gave the students of CHBS a “thumbs up” and fondly recalled his 2009 visit, school life turned upside down with a huge media buzz reporting on the event. Though addressed to a student, the letter exchange was self-evidently treated as

a diplomatic event. When we asked Izabella whether we could see it, she said she no longer had it: “The principal and head teachers got very excited about it, took it away and now I have no idea where it is—and in fact, I don’t really care.” Later on, the letter returned to the stage in a special “letter handover ceremony” as a sacred relic, framed in gold.

During an interview with a Chinese media outlet, “China’s Charm,” Izabella was questioned about her deep-rooted determination that propelled her along the path to success that culminated in her receiving the letter. She flawlessly demonstrated what was expected of her: an eloquent commendation of “Chinese culture” and a firm commitment to studying the language. When prompted to elaborate on what she liked about Chinese culture, she responded without hesitation: the tea ceremony. “I think the tea ceremony is so beautiful and complex, I admire it. It is so wonderful that it is impossible to describe it in words.”³⁹ Izabella performed the kind of *guanhua* expected of a “foreign friend of China” by fully adopting a depoliticized subjectivity (Hansen 2017). Steadfast fondness for officially defined Chinese culture in addition to the commitment to learning Chinese emerges as a metaphor for faithful loyalty to promoting “China’s story” that opens up a relatively calculable and risk-free career opportunity for those who are willing to comply.

9 | Conclusion: Authoritarian Convergence With Unexpected Outcomes

The story of CHBS is one of transformation from a multicultural experiment that attracted reformist teachers at a confident moment of liberalism to an institution whose association with the Chinese state positions it as a champion of the illiberal “revolution” (in Prime Minister Orbán’s words) embraced by the current Hungarian government—and attracts teachers and parents who either applaud or wish to benefit from it. The agents of this norm shift are as much Hungarian as Chinese.

The drivers of this remarkable story are both economic and political. Hungary’s post-1989 transition brought about an economy that is entirely dependent on foreign investment. It was a combination of courting investments with a commitment to multiculturalism that brought CHBS, this unique interstate institution, to life. The illiberal turn obviated the latter but left the former in place, and strengthened it in relation to China, now both an antiliberal ally and a leading world economy. The school turned into an arena of converging illiberal norms, which nonetheless produced unexpected and counterintuitive outcomes.

In an environment of steadily declining democratic norms, neither educators who wish to conform to the state agenda nor those who try to resist them see the importation of Chinese norms as something radically different. Rather, they are added to an existing context of negotiations and evasions. While Hungarian teachers subscribing to liberal values argued that occasionally tolerating Chinese “official talk” did not infringe on the freedoms the school otherwise enjoyed but blamed the illiberalizing Hungarian state for the democratic decline in school life, those teachers who embraced a more loyal attitude toward the

government saw the decline in school autonomy as a natural trend and often displayed fondness toward importing more authoritarian measures from China. In both ways, Hungarian teachers contributed voluntarily to transforming the school into a platform for “goodtelling China’s story” without any exogenous pressure or incentive from the Chinese side. Doing so, Hungarian teachers—reflecting the Hungarian government’s attitude—internalized the resignification of politics as culture, and complacently partook in China’s attempt to reclaim the “discursive authority” over its image (Pieke 2022b).

Chinese teachers had similarly varying experiences and attitudes: while some found the presence of the Chinese state within the institution via the ephemeral staging of *guanhua* on official visits was suffocating, others emphasized the temporariness of these situations and perceived the environment as liberating relative to China, finding themselves adopting more liberal values and enjoying freer lives. Adding to the divergent views of Chinese teachers and their Hungarian colleagues, the contrasting stories of Yifan and Izabella exemplify how fundamental individual backgrounds, perceptions, and goals are in informing subjects’ agentive decisions in accepting, appropriating, or rejecting particular norms. They also demonstrate that the transmission of shifting norms can be the result of an overall shift in prevailing conditions that is hard to attribute unproblematically to particular actors. Ultimately, the divergent paths and context dependency of subject formation within this institution urge a closer examination of the limits and fluidity of cultural regulation and governance.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹ This expression is usually translated as “telling China’s story well,” but *jianghao* carries an ideological charge that is best translated as Orwell did in Newspeak.

² Throughout the article, we will use China to denote the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and use Taiwan to denote the Republic of China.

³ For a detailed overview of educational reforms in China (see Liu and Dunne 2009; Dello-Iacovo 2009; Law 2014).

⁴ Chinese sources speak of “integrating Chinese standards into those of the EU,” (China National Radio 2023) but as there is no documentation publicly available, the nature of such integration cannot be verified.

⁵ In recent years, a string of European universities in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and France have closed CIs McCaleb (South China Morning Post 2020).

⁶ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna, 27 September 2022. Apart from Principal Zsuzsanna and Chinese principal Uncle Józsi, who are inevitably identifiable, all interviewees are anonymized and are given pseudonyms. All participants gave informed consent.

⁷ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna, 27 September 2022.

⁸ At primary schools in Hungary, pupils usually call teachers “Uncle” or “Aunt.”

⁹ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

¹⁰ According to data provided by the current Principal, in 2004 the school started with 87 students, 74 of whom were of Chinese nationality, 5 Hungarian (some of whom born in mixed marriages), in addition to 5 students of other background (Mongolian, Vietnamese, Cambodian).

¹¹ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

¹² According to data acquired from the Ministry of Education, in the 2022–2023 academic year, only 91 students are Chinese nationals out of a total of 530 students.

¹³ Interview with Móni, former deputy principal. 23 January 2023.

¹⁴ In 2017, Vice Premier Liu Yandong is greeted by the students of CHBS along with Péter Szijjártó (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade since 2014) and Péter Medgyessy (former Prime Minister). *Source*: (“A Magyar–Kínai Két Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola a Barátság Hídját Építi a Két Nép Között,” China Radio International n.d.). Accessed 1 March 2023.

¹⁵ There are also some non-Chinese sponsors, including the sports goods company Decathlon.

¹⁶ Interview with former teacher, Ilona. 15 September 2022.

¹⁷ Interview with former teacher, Ilona. 15 September 2022.

¹⁸ Fu and Zhu (n.d.).

¹⁹ *Source*: (“Levélátadó ünnepség az iskolában—2023. február 24.,” Magyar–Kínai Két Tanítási Nyelvű Általános Iskola és Gimnázium n.d.).

²⁰ Email exchange with Qianwei, 2018.

²¹ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

²² Email exchange with Qianwei, 2019.

²³ Interview with former teacher, Ilona. 15 September 2022.

²⁴ Capture from the school’s official image video. *Source*: <https://magyar-kinai.hu/index.php/iskolankrol/miert-a-magyar-kinai>. Accessed 1 March 2023.

²⁵ Speech delivered by one Hungarian student recipient on the 2023 New Year gala.

²⁶ Interview with former teacher, Ilona. 15 September 2022.

²⁷ Interview with Móni, former deputy principal. 23 January 2023.

²⁸ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

²⁹ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

³⁰ Interview with PA member couple. 23 November 2022.

³¹ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

³² Interview with former teacher, Ilona. 15 September 2022.

³³ Interview with teacher Meng. 3 November 2022.

³⁴ Interview with history teacher, Peter. 23 January 2023.

³⁵ Interview with László, former TLC teacher. 12 March 2023.

³⁶ Interview with Principal Zsuzsanna. 27 September 2022.

³⁷ Interview with Yifan, graduating student. 14 September 2023.

³⁸ Interview with Izabella, student. 1 March 2023.

³⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=726572555500908>. Accessed 1 March 2023.

⁴⁰ *Source*: <https://magyar-kinai.hu/index.php?view=article&id=163:levelatado-uennepeseg-az-iskolaban-2023-februar-24&catid=21>. Accessed 1 March 2023.

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