

Perceiving China Across Continents: Comparative Attitudes in Indonesia and Hungary toward China's Global Role

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Abstract

Indonesia and Hungary are influential in their respective regions—Indonesia in Southeast Asia and Hungary within the Visegrad Group. Both maintain close relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and have signed onto the Belt and Road Initiative, making Chinese presence increasingly visible. Yet, little research examines how local citizens perceive this presence. This paper compares perceptions of Indonesian and Hungarian university students regarding China's role. Building on Xi and Primiano's analysis on China's influence in Asia using secondary data, this study surveyed students in both countries that considers historical, political, and social factors. Findings show Indonesians feel closer to China, while Hungarians lean toward the United States. However, generally, both

Indonesians and Hungarians acknowledge China's developmental contributions positively.

Keywords: *China's Image, Power, University Student, Indonesia, Hungary*

1. Background

Over the past two decades, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has emerged as a central player in global affairs, particularly through its growing economic influence: in 2014, China became the world's largest trading nation as reckoned by the sum of its imports and exports. Attaining this status, China eclipsed even the United States. This may have contributed to the administration of US President Donald Trump launching a trade war against its near-peer competitor (Grosse, Gamso, & Nelson, 2021). This shift in economic stature has coincided with an assertive foreign policy agenda, positioning China as an alternative to the U.S.-led liberal international order.

Indeed, even more threatening to the global order than China's global economic reach is Beijing's efforts to transform China's identity and role conception, and the political consequences this may have on the international stage, since the launch of the PRC's "Go Global" (走出去) strategy in the early 2000s (Liu, 2023).

One of the most significant instruments of China's global strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI eclipses these other efforts to raise China to the position of global superpower, as it is designed as a massive infrastructure development project with global reach, expanding China's power and influence not just to Africa and Latin America, but deep into Europe, as well as closer to home in the Asia-Pacific. It is not only the global south and developing nations targeted by the BRI, but also developed countries with OECD status and states with high GDP per capita. Unlike Western models of development assistance, which are often tied to liberal economic reforms and conditionalities under the Washington Consensus, China offers loans and investment with fewer political strings attached in relational perspective

(Wang, 2021). This has made its model appealing to states dissatisfied with traditional Western approaches to development.

China's approach has been successful because there are ample regimes in the international community that are dissatisfied with the Western approach to development assistance, which they deem restrictive and with double standards. China therefore has presented them with an alternative to the Washington Consensus way of lending that demands liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and maintaining strict fiscal discipline. The development assistance provided by China, in contrast, does away with those strings. However, serious efforts are still needed for the BRI to conform to sustainability norms established by international frameworks (Smith, 2021).

Beijing has also engaged in several other efforts to establish for itself bona fides as a major player on the international scene, such as brokering a deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran to restore relations, providing aid and loans in Africa and Latin America, and increasingly re-establishing itself as the Middle Kingdom of East Asia. Due to these and other efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China's image is changing, and it is the purpose of this research to examine how these perceptions compare across different regions, specifically in Southeast Asia and Central Europe.

China has engaged in several projects in both Indonesia and Hungary as a part of both its BRI initiative and its "Go Global" strategy. Indonesia is a strategic country; predominantly Moslem and the biggest democracy in Southeast Asia, with an oversized influence in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Indonesia thus could be an important strategic partner for China in securing Beijing's interests in the region. On the other hand, located in the heart of Central Europe, Hungary is a member of both the European Union and NATO, and is a vital foothold for China to extend its influence into Europe. Moreover, it borders Serbia, which is another of the PRC's closest allies in Europe, and a crucial component of Beijing's campaign in Southern and Central Europe.

Indonesia and Hungary have enjoyed intimate relations with China since their respective leaders took office: President Joko Widodo, popularly known as Jokowi, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Both of these leaders appear to prefer

to cooperate more with China in strategic projects. For instance, Indonesia enjoyed a loan from China to build a high-speed railway, while Hungary has been focusing on attracting investment from China for providing jobs and establishing manufacturing in Hungary.

In fact, this relationship does not only apply to heads of state at the presidential or prime ministerial level, but also to high-level government officials, bureaucrats, and ministers are getting more comfortable with stronger relations with their Chinese counterparts. For example, at the ministerial level, the Indonesian state has a position, Coordinator for Cooperation with China, to handle paperwork for the large volume of Chinese investments and involvement in various business sectors including nickel smelters, cement, and the steel industry. China's investment has been growing since the Jokowi administration took charge in 2014, and it appears it will continue unabated during the tenure of Jokowi's successor, Prabowo Subianto. The relations between Indonesia and China remains in a good place with the continuation of the Prabowo administration (Peterson, 2024).

Meanwhile, Hungary has been continuing its long, close relationship with China since Budapest officially recognized the PRC in 1949. Both foreign ministers and high officers enjoy friendly interactions and issue joint statements on state visits. Political and economic relations between China and Hungary have been at a high level since Orbán took office in 2010.

The existence of close Indonesia-China relations and long-standing China-Hungary relations, it is interesting to further explore the perceptions of the people of the two countries, and what views they have towards the PRC. Despite these close ties, relatively little research has been conducted on how the populations of these countries perceive China.

Comparative perception studies in international relations explore how states and societies view one another, and how such perceptions influence policy behavior. More recent scholarship employs comparative designs and survey methods to map cross-national perceptions. For instance, Silver, Devlin & Huang, (2019) and Wike et al., (2023) document significant regional variation in global opinions of China; positive in many developing countries, but increasingly

negative in advanced economies. Xi and Primiano (2020), meanwhile, provide a methodological model for studying external perceptions of China.

Despite these advances, the literature remains dominated by state-level and elite-focused analyses (Shambaugh, 2013; Ho and Lee, 2024; Yang and Keller, 2025). This leaves only a limited understanding of how public or generational perceptions contribute to shaping foreign relations narratives. This gap is particularly relevant as younger cohorts, empowered by digital media, increasingly participate in international discourse and influence foreign policy climates. Integrating insights from both soft power and perception studies thus offers a more comprehensive view of how China's global image is constructed, contested, and localized across diverse political and cultural contexts.

This study addresses that gap by investigating how young people in Indonesia and Hungary perceive China and how these perceptions contribute to the evolving discourse on foreign relations. As digital-native generations increasingly shape public opinion, policy debates, and transnational communication, understanding their views offers novel insight into the social foundations of international relations. By focusing on youth perspectives, this research not only enriches the literature on China's global image but also reveals how generational worldviews may influence the future trajectory of bilateral relations. In doing so, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how China's rise is interpreted across different regions and political systems. How do public perceptions of China vary between Indonesia and Hungary across political, economic, and cultural dimensions? This sort of China perception study has been undertaken in several nations since the relative rise in China's prominence in politics and economics, and hence in the public's consciousness. However, there has been little research comparing two different countries' perceptions of China, let alone on different continents. In this study, the authors aim to compare Hungarians' and Indonesians' perceptions of China.

2. Methods

2.1 Data

The study uses primary data collection from citizens in Indonesia and Hungary to describe their perceptions of their countries' relations with China. The data was collected through a survey using a questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of China's influence and role in their respective countries with online and informed consent. The selected and accessible sample consisted of students in both countries, using local online surveyors. The sample was obtained through accidental/purposive sampling based on accessibility. The sample consisted of individuals of different ages and geographical backgrounds. In addition, the majors chosen by these young people also varied. The survey collected data related to respondents' views on aspects such as China's economic and political influence, China's role in development, and their attitudes towards Chinese norms and values. By combining samples from two geographically and culturally different countries, this research can provide a comparative picture of China's image in Central Europe and Southeast Asia. The model is inspired by the studies that were conducted by Xi and Primiano (2020) and ISEAS (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies)- Yusof Ishak Institute Singapore on Southeast Asian Survey 2023 (2023) and it has conducted reliability test for its questionnaire with the rate of scale reliability coefficient 0.6804.

2.2 Rasch Model

To analyze respondents' perceptions, this study used the Rasch Model, which is one of the methods in item response theory (IRT). This model was chosen because of its ability to accurately measure individual responses to poll questions, while considering the difficulty level of the items asked (Parmaningsih and Saputro, 2021). In addition, the Rasch Model also has several advantages for conducting analyses in social science because it fulfills the five principles of measurement models. First, it is able to provide a linear scale with equal intervals. Second, it can

predict missing data. Third, it can provide more precise estimates. Fourth, it can detect model inaccuracy. Fifth, it produces replicable measurements (Sumintono and Widhiarso, 2014).

In the context of this study, the Rasch Model was used to measure student perceptions of China in several key dimensions, such as economic influence, politics, and China's contribution to development in the respondent's country. Each dimension of perception served as a parameter to be measured by the Rasch Model, with the aim of identifying the extent to which respondents' views of China varied between them. This analysis allows the research to explore more detailed and reliable differences in perceptions between individuals as well as between countries.

Through the use of the Rasch Model, the study was able to produce objective and comparable measurements, helping to understand more in-depth perceptions of how university students in both countries view China, including the factors that are influential in shaping perceptions of the relationship. The table below shows the dimensions of perception that were measured by the study:

Table 1. Research Dimensions

Dimension	Question	Answer Choices
Development	China's role in development in your country?	Worsen Significantly / Worsen / Remain the Same / Improved / Improved Significantly
	China should make bilateral trade truly mutually beneficial by addressing trade imbalances?	Strongly Agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly Disagree
	China should resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law?	

Table 1 (Continued).

Dimension	Question	Answer Choices
Democracy	The development of democracy in China?	Worsen Significantly / Worsen / Remain the Same / Improved / Improved Significantly
	Get rid of parliament / Strong leader to decide things?	Strongly Agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly Disagree
	Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office?	
	The army should come in to govern the country?	
	We should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people?	
Future Relationship	The future of Indonesia/Hungary closer to? (US/China)	US/ China
	Cooperation preference of Indonesia/Hungary?	
	The future of Indonesia-China/Hungary-China relations?	Worsen Significantly / Worsen / Remain the Same / Improved / Improved Significantly
Chinese Influence	Chinese influence in your country?	Positive/Negative
	Use of economic tools and tourism to punish my country's foreign policy choices?	Strongly Agree / Agree / Neutral / Disagree / Strongly Disagree
	Mistreatment of its minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang and its handling of Hong Kong?	
	Strong-arm tactics in Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Mekong?	
	Growing economic dominance and political influence in my country?	
	Tacit support for Russian invasion of Ukraine?	
	Interference in my country's domestic affairs (including influence over the ethnic Chinese citizens of my country)?	

3. Discussions

3.1 China and Indonesia Relations

The perception of China among the Indonesian public is a fraught one. It is colored by the long history, going back as far as the days of the Dutch colonial times, of prejudice against the country's ethnic Chinese population. During the Second World War, members of the Chinese diaspora were perceived to have been sympathetic to communism, and more recently, rich Chinese-Indonesian businessmen further invite resentment and suspicion among the local population. Indonesia saw a purge of communist insurgents in the 1960s, in which hundreds of suspected communists, many ethnically Chinese, lost their lives after the Indonesian military claimed that a coup was underway. Likewise, the aforementioned Chinese tycoons were blamed for the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, and this erupted in riots in 1998, in which an estimated 1,000 people were murdered, many of them ethnically Chinese. Though comparatively tempered, such ill-feeling persists, with many Indonesians referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus," and some netizens calling for a fatwa on Chinese nationals and even Chinese-Indonesians. This section will review the factors that influence public perception of China in Indonesia, primarily the economic and trade ties, people-to-people interactions such as tourism and education, and the military interactions that receive much attention in the media (Rakhmat and Pashya, 2020). Against this historical backdrop, many Indonesians today are no longer consumed by the kind of anti-Chinese sentiment that erupted violently in 1998. The country's democratic transition, combined with greater cultural diversity and exposure to global norms, has gradually reshaped public attitudes. Lessons drawn from the dark history of 1998 have also played a role, creating stronger awareness of the dangers of ethnic scapegoating and the need for national cohesion. Among younger generations, particularly university students, there is a noticeable shift toward greater openness and friendliness toward Chinese Indonesians. This is reflected not only in daily social interactions but also in collective political behaviour. The most recent example came during the September 2025

demonstrations, which, unlike the riots of 1998, were not marked by looting or violence targeting Chinese-owned businesses or communities. Instead, the protests remained focused on broader political and economic grievances, signalling that anti-Chinese sentiment is no longer the automatic outlet for popular frustration but tend to be grassroot racism (Tanasaldy, 2022). While underlying prejudices have not disappeared entirely, the relative absence of ethnic scapegoating points to a generational change in attitudes (Fitriani, 2018) and provides a foundation for more constructive perceptions of China and its role in Indonesia's development.

Given this difficult history, recent progress in the relationship between the two countries has been promising. When China first launched its BRI program in 2013, its focus was on the construction of enormous infrastructure projects such as railways, roads, and ports. Recently, however, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a shift in focus toward "small but beautiful" projects in Beijing's partner countries, mostly those related to connectivity. Of the BRI participating countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is the largest. The scheme has led to billions of dollars' worth of investment in nickel processing, as well as the region's first high-speed rail project. The shift, however, means that new projects will be less high-stakes, and smaller in scale. This downsizing of the BRI is likely due to the downturn in the global economy, as well as that of China, and the trade war with the United States. This is also likely aimed at rehabilitating China's public image, which took a hit when several BRI-recipient countries, including Sri Lanka and Zambia, defaulted on their BRI loans, prompting claims that China was setting "debt traps" to ensnare, and thereby put itself in a position to manipulate, poorer countries (Syarif, 2023).

China is Indonesia's largest trading partner, as well as its second-largest investor origin country. The trade value between the two countries exceeded USD133 billion in 2022, while investment volume reached a value of USD8.2 billion that same year. In 2023, China played host to a number of high-ranking Indonesian officials, suggesting that those numbers had nowhere else to go but up. Indonesian President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo met with his Chinese counterpart in July 2023 to seek help to build industrial facilities in North Kalimantan, as well as

to develop the Nusantara Capital City. The meeting produced no fewer than eight memorandums of understanding (MOUs) covering increased Chinese purchases of *porang* flour (which is a raw material for certain types of processed snack foods), tabasheer powder (a raw material used in pharmaceutical and cosmetics products), and bird's nests. A bird that is common in parts of Indonesia, the swiftlet, is known to make its nest out of dried saliva, and this nest can be harvested and made into a soup that, according to Chinese belief, has a number of health benefits, in addition to being delicious. This soup carries a high price tag in China, making the harvesting and exportation of these nests a big business. Other commercial medical areas covered by the MOUs included vaccine production, equipment for diagnosing diseases, and health information systems, as well as other economic cooperation (Bhwana, 2024).

Indonesia is a favored destination for Chinese companies to build factories. There are a number of reasons for this, most especially the ready availability of raw materials such as bauxite and copper. Moreover, since the Sino-US trade war began, a number of Chinese companies have found that it may be easier for them to penetrate the US market if they pose as an Indonesian, as opposed to a Chinese, exporter. This can be especially profitable in the lucrative electric vehicle (EV) market. Wuling Motors, a company with headquarters based in China's Guangxi province, recently opened an assembly plant just outside Jakarta, and its Air EV hatchback dominates EV sales in Indonesia. Moreover, the Chinese battery manufacturer Contemporary Amperex Technology Co., (CATL) committed last year to a US\$5.97 billion joint investment plan for lithium-ion battery production in Indonesia, covering every step in the supply chain, from mining the raw materials, to fabricating the battery cells, to end-of-life recycling. This venture is made possible by Indonesia's wealth in nickel that, thanks to Chinese investments in mining and processing, turned Indonesia into the world's biggest nickel producer. Several Chinese players in EV battery production, including CNGR Advanced Material Co., Ltd., Ningbo Lygend Mining Co. Ltd., and Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt Industry Co., Ltd., are opening smelters in Indonesia to process nickel for battery production (Maulia et al., 2023).

Trade and investment are not the only avenues of exchange between China and Indonesia. Education, which is also a big business, is a sector in which many Indonesians come into contact with their Chinese peers, helping to inform their opinions of the country. Perhaps the biggest soft-power effort launched by Beijing to improve China's image abroad has been the Confucius Institutes.

No fewer than six Confucius Institutes, in collaboration with Indonesia's Coordinating Board for Mandarin Language Education, are in operation across Indonesia to teach Mandarin and promote Chinese culture. Student exchanges have been taking place since 2011 between Nanchang University in China's Jiangxi province and South Sulawesi's Hasanuddin University. A reported 2,000 Indonesian students took part in exchange trips to China from 2011 to 2015. Moreover, East Java's Muhammadiyah Malang University, Bandung's Maranatha Christian University, and West Kalimantan's Tanjungpura University also run Confucius Institutes. Other institutions with a focus on Chinese culture include Al Azhar Indonesia University in Jakarta, and Petra Christian University in Surabaya, whose Center for Chinese Indonesian Studies opened in 2011. These establishments, especially the Confucius Institutes, are designed to address the problem of anti-China sentiment in Indonesia (Budhwar, 2023).

The question remains an open one, however, as to whether the Confucius Institutes, though they unquestionably have helped Indonesians learn about Chinese language and culture, have done anything measurable to improve China's image in that country. Indeed, by many accounts, there remains a lingering anti-China sentiment just under the surface, one that has long been present. According to some analysts, this could be due to the fact that most Confucius Institutes are located in big cities, whereas anti-Chinese attitudes are most pronounced in the villages, towns, and countryside. This calls into question their efficacy (Rakhmat and Pashya, 2020).

The increased interaction between Indonesian and Chinese people is not restricted to students in the big cities. Tourism between the two countries is strong, and growing—especially since Jakarta enacted a policy of granting visa-free entry to Chinese passport holders. The number of Chinese tourists visiting Indonesia increased by 18 percent in 2020, before the industry was flattened by COVID-19.

In seeking to undo the pandemic-related damage, Indonesian tourism authorities have held a number of promotions touting the country's most favored destinations among Chinese tourists, who tend to prefer visiting Jakarta and Bali, and who stay longer than tourists from other countries. Other destinations receiving promotion include Lake Toba in North Sumatra, Mandalika in West Nusa Tenggara, and Likupang in North Sulawesi. In reciprocation, at least a dozen China-based airlines announced that they had relaunched direct flights to Indonesia. These include China Eastern Airlines, Juneyao Airlines, and China Southern Airlines (Indonesia aims, 2024; Budhwar, 2023).

One of the biggest sticking points in the relationship with China, as with anywhere in the Indo-Pacific, is in the realm of military and security. For four decades, the claims and counterclaims over islands, islets, and features in the South China Sea—officially renamed the North Natuna Sea in 2017 by the Indonesian government—have kept tensions high. Any form of peaceful settlement has been elusive. On April 12, 2024, however, a spokesman for the PRC Defense Ministry announced that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) wanted to improve ties with Indonesia. This appears to have been a clear response to the February election victory of Prabowo Subianto, a former Minister of Defense, and Prabowo's choice to make his first post-win visit to China (Dipua et al., 2021).

Although China and Indonesia have enjoyed a degree of defense and security cooperation for many years, including in terms of defense technology, personnel training, and joint drills, there remains friction. The waters near the Natuna Islands, owned by Indonesia, are often the site of incursions by PRC coast guard ships and those of its maritime militia—a deputized fleet of fishing boats that Beijing often deploys to establish a physical presence in the waters surrounding islands that it claims. In most cases, Indonesia has employed Track-II diplomacy to mediate such disputes, in order not to provoke the PLA and imperil economic ties. It has been suggested that, from China's perspective, the aforementioned increase in trade and financial ties with Jakarta is also useful in building leverage against any moves Indonesia might be tempted to make in terms of forcefully defending its rights in the waters around the Natuna Islands, or even mediating in another party's favor in China's many island disputes with other members of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In other words, the closer Jakarta comes economically to Beijing, the fewer options it has to defend its interests in the maritime domain (Rakhmat, 2024).

Despite this difficult backdrop, however, recent developments suggest a shift in attitudes. Survey data among university students suggest that Indonesians view China as a close partner, more so than Hungarians in a comparative context. This reflects not only the strength of economic ties, China as Indonesia's largest trading partner and second-largest investor, but also growing exposure through education, tourism, and cultural exchanges. Many students acknowledge China's role in infrastructure development, investment in critical industries such as nickel and electric vehicles, and opportunities provided through scholarships and Confucius Institutes. While lingering anxieties about Chinese influence persist, especially regarding sovereignty in the North Natuna Sea, these are tempered by recognition of China's material contributions to Indonesia's growth. Thus, the data suggest that public perception in Indonesia is marked by ambivalence: an enduring undercurrent of distrust rooted in history, but also a pragmatic appreciation of China's developmental role and an increasing sense of closeness among younger, educated Indonesians.

3.2 China and Hungary Relations

President Xi Jinping made a state visit to Hungary in May, 2024, along with two other European countries, on his first visit to Europe in five years, in what *The New York Times* characterized as part of an effort to exacerbate Europe's growing fissures with the United States and position China as a potential leader in a post-American world order (Cohen and Buckley, 2024).

It was not the first time the Hungarian leader has been accused of supporting the recent movement, led by Russia, China and Iran, to dismantle the Western-led Liberal International Order governed by rules and norms. On October 17-18, 2023, at the 3rd Belt & Road Forum in Beijing, Orbán—the only EU leader present—spoke on his views of the West's decline. The 14 years that the Orbán administration has been in power saw a shift in Hungary's role in the global order,

with not just the government, but government-supported media outlets and think tanks promoting anti-Western perspectives and offering a pro-China, pro-Russia view. As a result, Hungary has emerged as a European beachhead deep in the heart of the EU, as well as in NATO (Hompot, 2023).

Beijing's BRI initiative made a synergistic counterpart to Budapest's "Opening to the East" policy. This seemed a natural fit for Hungary, which became the first European nation to sign on to the BRI. So far, the biggest and most high-profile infrastructure project has been the Budapest-Belgrade railway, which would profit not just Hungary but Serbia; another China-friendly destination in Europe. In 2023, Chinese investments reached almost 8 billion euros: the lion's share of the 13 billion euros that Hungary received in foreign direct investment that year. In financial ties, Hungary is proving to be an attractive destination, with a number of Chinese financial institutions eyeing branches in the country, after seeing the Bank of China's successful establishment of its Central and Eastern European headquarters in Budapest. China Construction Bank (CCB), too, has established a financial technology product innovation laboratory in Hungary. Like Indonesia, Hungary is an attractive partner for CATL, as well as EV firms such as Eve Energy Co., Ltd. and BYD Auto Co., Ltd., which seek to make Hungary the site for their European hub for manufacturing batteries and electric vehicles (Will Hungary's new, 2024; Bráder, 2023).

EV-related projects seem to be the vanguard of Chinese firms' interest in Hungary. BYD, which took the global top spot in manufacturing electric and hybrid cars last year, has earmarked billions of dollars to open a factory in Szeged—its first European plant. The company, headquartered in Shenzhen, already has a fair-sized presence in Hungary, with an electronic components factory in Páty, an eBus factory in Komárom, and a battery assembly plant in Fót. These are just a few of the 33 projects financed by Chinese investors that over the past five years have created more than 13,000 jobs and marked China as Hungary's largest investor nation for the second time since 2020. China is also its ninth biggest trade partner, with 4 percent of total foreign trade volume. Today, more than 400 Chinese companies enjoy a presence in Hungary, employing approximately 20,000 people. The largest of these firms is undoubtedly

BorsodChem which, since being purchased by China's Wanhua Chemical Group Co., Ltd., has enjoyed revenues of over USD3 billion (Chinese Investments, 2024).

All of this investment promises to transform Hungary into an EV powerhouse in Europe—or at least host nation to a Chinese EV powerhouse. The same pattern is developing in the realm of 5G technology, with Hungary taking a central role in logistics and manufacturing for Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd., which is developing the local 5G network and using Hungary as its European hub. This is despite warnings from Washington that Huawei cooperates with the CCP government and represents a clear intelligence and security threat (Gizińska and Uznańska, 2024).

The Hungarian relationship with China goes deeper than trade and investment. In terms of tourism and cultural exchanges, 277,000 Chinese tourists visited Hungary in the year before the outbreak of COVID, and tour operators are keen to see a return of such volumes. China began issuing visas on arrival to Hungarian citizens on March 14, and 13 weekly flights link Budapest to large Chinese cities. Reciprocally, the Hungarian government offers long-term visas for the heads of Chinese firms that invest in Hungary. On its end, China has awarded Hungary with the Gold Certificate of Quality Destination from the Chinese edition of National Geographic Traveler, as well as the New Emerging Destination of the Year from Voyage Magazine in China and two other awards from China's National Tourism News (China to offer, 2024; Domestic Tourism, 2024).

Recently, the relationship has bled into the realm of regional politics. On six occasions, Hungary used its veto power in the EU Council to shut down attempts to officially condemn China's record on human rights and other crimes. The Hungarian government also became the first on the continent, though sadly not the last, to permit Chinese police officers to be deployed to patrol the streets of its capital, as well as cooperation in other areas of "public security." Ostensibly deployed to protect Chinese tourists in Budapest, in fact the Chinese police are often found to be tracking down dissidents against the Communist regime and monitoring the actions and opinions of the members of the Chinese diaspora, of whom there are approximately 18,000 in Hungary (Gizińska and Uznańska, 2024).

Budapest appears to have rushed in where its neighbors fear to tread, taking advantage of the vacuum formed by the larger trend among countries in Europe and elsewhere to “de-couple,” or at least “de-risk” from China that is equally eager to establish a presence in Europe. As already examined, this advancement is intellectually consistent with the rhetoric coming out of Orbán’s government to the effect that the Western nations are not the only game in town, and that China, and to a lesser degree, Russia, present a viable alternative to which Hungary can hitch its wagon. According to Orbán, “We are convinced that this is an initiative that will change the world, transform the global economy, and serve the well-being of more people than ever before” (Gizińska and Uznańska, 2024; Bráder, 2023).

Alas, this may all prove to be a Faustian bargain. The more Hungary advocates for China within the European Union and NATO, the more it erodes its own good standing within those bodies. Likewise, China’s reputation within Europe suffers by being so inextricably tied to this “troublemaker” country, as Hungary is increasingly seen in the EU (Horváth, 2025). Moreover, the close relationship cannot help but affect the Hungarian public’s perception of China. While the government narrative is one of “China as friend,” today’s citizenry has alternate channels, other than the government-approved media outlets, from which to find information, and public opinion often deviates from the official line on certain issues. This was certainly the case recently with the proposed plan to allow Shanghai’s Fudan University to build a campus in Budapest. The public strongly opposed the plan, and took to the streets of Budapest in protest in 2021. They feared the seemingly untrammelled growth of Chinese influence in Hungary, as well as the implicit intelligence threat of this closeness between the regimes in Beijing and Budapest (Qin et al., 2025; Gizińska and Uznańska, 2024).

Much has changed in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) since China launched its 16+1 initiative in 2012. Today, CEE countries generally fall into one of three categories. Hungary, along with Serbia, represent the first group, which continue to enjoy active across-the-board engagement and make Beijing ties a central component of their foreign policy.

The second category tends to view China as a potential security threat, and they are wary about engaging Beijing. The Baltics and the Czech Republic make up this group, with the former having already abandoned the 16+1 scheme, and the latter currently considering doing the same. The third category, and the largest, tends to be the most pragmatic, viewing engagement with China as a game of tradeoffs between profit and peril. Poland represents a typical example. They also perhaps best reflect the Europe-wide approach to China: once a hopeful new trade partner and member of the international community of nations that held exciting promise; now a potential superpower peer competitor seeking to use the region as a Trojan horse to enter the continent (Šebok et al., 2024).

Yet public opinion does not fully mirror the government's enthusiastic embrace of Beijing. While Hungary benefits economically from Chinese investments, protests against the proposed Fudan University campus in 2021 revealed anxieties about sovereignty, security, and the growing influence of Chinese institutions. Surveys among Hungarian university students further reflect this ambivalence: compared with Indonesian students, Hungarian students feel closer to the United States and remain skeptical of China's political role, though they do recognize China's importance as a developmental and economic partner. This divergence between elite discourse and popular perception highlights the contested nature of Hungary's alignment with Beijing. On one hand, China's material contributions are welcomed; on the other, the Hungarian public remains wary of overdependence, particularly when framed against broader European debates on "de-risking" from China.

This dynamic may also be attributed to Orbán's nationalist approach, in which foreigners, particularly those who are not ethnic Hungarian, are often portrayed as potential threats to local identity and social cohesion (Nagy, 2025). Within this framing, the government's political closeness to China does not necessarily translate into societal acceptance of Chinese influence or people. The relationship between Hungary and China at the leadership level is built on strategic pragmatism and shared skepticism toward Western liberalism, yet this elite alignment does not automatically foster grassroots affinity. Although an

increasing number of Chinese students pursue higher education in Hungary, their presence raises questions about integration and everyday social interaction. Do Chinese and Hungarian students genuinely engage with each other, or do cultural and political divides limit meaningful exchange? The persistence of skepticism among Hungarian students toward China, despite recognition of its economic role, suggests that people-to-people ties remain underdeveloped. This gap underscores the broader divergence between state-led cooperation and public perceptions in Hungary, where economic pragmatism coexists uneasily with cultural distance and latent anxieties about Chinese influence.

4. Analysis and Findings

The summary statistics reveal distinct demographic, academic, and geographic profiles between respondents from Hungary and Indonesia. In the Hungarian sample (N = 43), the average age was 23.9 years, with females comprising 65.1 per cent and males 34.9 per cent. In contrast, the Indonesian sample (N = 172) had a younger average age of 19.8 years and a reversed gender distribution, with males representing 55.8 per cent and females 44.2 per cent.

In terms of academic background, more than half of respondents in the first group were studying Business (58.1%), followed by Arts and Social Sciences (16.3%), Humanities (9.3%), Medicine (7.0%), and smaller proportions in Computer Science, International Relations, Natural Sciences, and Political Sciences (each 2.3%). Meanwhile, in the second group, the largest academic concentration was in International Relations (70.9%), followed by Political Sciences (25.6%), and a smaller share in Business (3.5%). These findings suggest substantial variation in disciplinary representation between the two samples, with the first group being dominated by business-related fields, while the second is largely composed of students in political and international studies.

Geographically, respondents in the first group were predominantly located in Budapest (88.4%), with only small proportions residing in Körösladány, Alsónémedi, Erdőkertes, and Uppsala (each below 5%). In

the second group, the majority of participants were from Java (73.8%), followed by Sumatra (13.4%), Kalimantan (5.2%), Nusa Tenggara and Bali (4.1%), Sulawesi (2.3%), and Papua (1.2%). This indicates that while the first group is concentrated in a single European city, the second group is more geographically diverse across multiple Indonesian regions. Overall, the table highlights clear demographic, academic, and geographic differences between the two respondent groups.

Table 2. Summary Statistics

		N <i>(Hungary)</i>	% <i>(ave.)</i>	N <i>(Indonesia)</i>	% <i>(ave.)</i>
Total Samples		43	23.9 years	172	19.8 years
Gender	Female	28	65.1	76	44.2
	Male	15	34.9	96	55.8
Study Area	Business	25	58.1	6	3.5
	Arts and Social Sciences	7	16.3		
	Humanities	4	9.3		
	Medicines	3	7.0		
	Computer Science	1	2.3		
	International Relations	1	2.3	122	70.9
	Natural Sciences	1	2.3		
	Political Sciences	1	2.3	44	25.6
Area	Budapest	38	88.4		
	Körösladány	2	4.7		
	Alsónémedi	1	2.3		
	Erdokertes	1	2.3		
	Uppsala	1	2.3		
	Jawa			127	73.8
	Kalimantan			9	5.2

Table 2 (Continued).

		N (Hungary)	% (ave.)	N (Indonesia)	% (ave.)
Area	Nusa tenggara & Bali			7	4.1
	Papua			2	1.2
	Sulawesi			4	2.3
	Sumatera			23	13.4

The table below presents the perceptions of citizens from Indonesia and Hungary with regard to China's influence, development, and democratic processes in their respective countries. A majority of citizens in both Indonesia and Hungary perceive China's influence more positively than negatively. Both countries are in need of China's participation in their development plans, such as transportation infrastructure and raw mineral extraction and processing. Hungary relies on China for industrialization and as a trading partner, as well. In terms of democratic awareness, however, people in both countries seem to disagree with the basic principles of China's governance structure.

Table 3. China's Influence Overview

Variable	Indonesia	Hungary
China's Influence	Positive: 79,7% Negative: 20,3%	Positive: 53,3% Negative: 46,5%
China's role in development	Improved significantly: 68,8%	Improved significantly: 72,1%
China's democracy development	Worsen significantly: 80,2%	Worsen significantly: 79,1%

Still looking at democratic awareness, Hungarians are more concerned, and more assertive in expressing their disapproval of Chinese power practices, than Indonesians are. However, both Hungarians and Indonesians disagree with the majority of the governance practices employed by China, and are wary of implementing these in their own countries.

Table 4. Democratic Awareness

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
There are too many political parties in my country; there should only be one.	Strongly Agree	1.1	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	1.7	Agree	7
	Neutral	17.2	Neutral	4.6
	Disagree	51.7	Disagree	18.6
	Strongly Disagree	28.3	Strongly Disagree	69.8
We should get rid of parliament and let a strong leader decide policy.	Strongly Agree	1.1	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	5.2	Agree	4.6
	Neutral	9.8	Neutral	11.6
	Disagree	43.1	Disagree	14
	Strongly Disagree	40.8	Strongly Disagree	69.8
The army should have a larger role in governing the country	Strongly Agree	0	Strongly Agree	2.3
	Agree	8.6	Agree	0
	Neutral	19.5	Neutral	14
	Disagree	44.9	Disagree	27.9
	Strongly Disagree	27	Strongly Disagree	55.8
We should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people.	Strongly Agree	0.6	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	7.5	Agree	9.3
	Neutral	8.5	Neutral	11.6
	Disagree	42	Disagree	32.6
	Strongly Disagree	41.4	Strongly Disagree	46.5

Additionally, it can be noticed that a close to zero respondents from Hungary favor closer ties with China, and the vast majority of respondents favor closer ties with the United States. While the difference is less pronounced, the majority of respondents in Indonesia also favor closer ties to the United States than to China, though only by a few percentage points.

Table 5. US vs China Perception

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
The future of my country would be better if we became closer with China and farther from the US.	Strongly Agree	0	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	8	Agree	4.7
	Neutral	60.9	Neutral	18.6
	Disagree	28.7	Disagree	48.8
	Strongly Disagree	2.4	Strongly Disagree	27.9
My preference is for my government to cooperate with the US rather than China.	Strongly Agree	0	Strongly Agree	9.3
	Agree	9.8	Agree	44.2
	Neutral	61.5	Neutral	30.2
	Disagree	25.9	Disagree	11.6
	Strongly Disagree	2.9	Strongly Disagree	4.7

On the aspect of the outlook of Indonesia and Hungary's relationship with China in the future, Indonesia has a percentage of ± 39 per cent stating that their country's relationship with China will be positive. Hungary only has a percentage of ± 22 per cent stating that their country's relationship with China will be positive. This analysis suggests that Indonesians are more likely to agree, and are more optimistic about, future relations with China.

Table 6. Perceptions on Hungary and Indonesia's relations with China

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
The future of my country's relations with China are very positive.	Strongly Agree	1.7	Strongly Agree	2.3
	Agree	37.4	Agree	20.9
	Neutral	53.4	Neutral	41.9
	Disagree	7.5	Disagree	27.9
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	4

In terms of China's negative influence, a larger percentage of Indonesians agree with statements to the effect that China is having a bad influence in the economic and military fields. For example, more Indonesians believe that China uses its economy and tourism as tools, dominates the economy, is aggressive in the South China Sea, and supports Russia's actions in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Hungarians have a higher percentage who believe that China does not treat minorities in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong properly. This suggests that Hungary's democratic values are more dominant, while Indonesia is more pragmatic in responding to China's actions, both militarily and in its political and economic policies. This may also reveal a qualitative difference in the media narrative, in Hungary compared to Indonesia, about the plight of China's Uighurs and its other ethnic minorities (Hasram & Suryana, 2025; Turcsányi et al., 2019).

Table 7. China's negative influence

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
China uses economic tools and tourism as punishment for my country's foreign policy choices.	Strongly Agree	4.6	Strongly Agree	4.8
	Agree	38.5	Agree	7.1
	Neutral	40.8	Neutral	52.4
	Disagree	14.4	Disagree	28.6
	Strongly Disagree	1.7	Strongly Disagree	7.1
China treats its minorities in Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong very well.	Strongly Agree	0	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	7.5	Agree	4.9
	Neutral	43.1	Neutral	31.7
	Disagree	40.2	Disagree	34.1
	Strongly Disagree	9.2	Strongly Disagree	29.3

Table 7 (Continued).

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
Beijing interferes in my country's domestic affairs (including influence over the ethnic Chinese citizens living in my country).	Strongly Agree	0.6	Strongly Agree	0
	Agree	15.5	Agree	14.6
	Neutral	50	Neutral	63.4
	Disagree	30.5	Disagree	19.5
	Strongly Disagree	3.4	Strongly Disagree	2.4
Beijing tacitly supports the Russian invasion of Ukraine.	Strongly Agree	2.9	Strongly Agree	9.5
	Agree	28.7	Agree	26.2
	Neutral	56.9	Neutral	52.4
	Disagree	11.5	Disagree	9.5
China's economic dominance and political influence in my country is growing.	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	2.4
	Strongly Agree	12.6	Strongly Agree	14.3
	Agree	65.5	Agree	47.6
	Neutral	17.3	Neutral	23.8
	Disagree	4.6	Disagree	11.9
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	2.4
China uses strong-arm tactics in dealing with Taiwan, the South China Sea and the Mekong.	Strongly Agree	6.9	Strongly Agree	7.1
	Agree	46.6	Agree	42.9
	Neutral	40.2	Neutral	40.5
	Disagree	6.3	Disagree	7.1
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	2.4

In terms of China's normative actions, Indonesia is more assertive in wanting China to act accordingly in the areas of people-to-people relations, respect for the sovereignty of other countries, and a balanced trade policy. On the other hand, Hungary has a higher percentage who believe that China should

peacefully resolve territorial issues, both on land and at sea, and respect the applicable international laws. Although Hungary has been excoriated by the West for what they claim are illiberal border politics (Scott, 2023) stripping away its democratic values, Hungarian youth still hold normative values more strongly than their Indonesian counterparts. This is an interesting point worthy of further exploration. This may be due to the strong foundations laid before Orbán took office in 2010, when Hungary was one of the frontrunners of democracy in Europe (Bos and Lorenz, 2023). This may indicate that the interaction between China and Hungary has been going better than in Indonesia, which may be more threatened by China's actions in the region and fearful of their more asymmetrical relationship.

Beyond these descriptive patterns, inferential analysis further clarifies how different variables relate to perceptions in each country.

Table 8. China's normative action

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
China should deepen mutual understanding by enhancing people-to-people relations with my country.	Strongly Agree	9.8	Strongly Agree	4.8
	Agree	52.3	Agree	38.1
	Neutral	31.6	Neutral	35.7
	Disagree	6.3	Disagree	19
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	2.4
China should respect my country's sovereignty and not try to influence my country's foreign policy choices.	Strongly Agree	52.3	Strongly Agree	48.8
	Agree	40.2	Agree	31.7
	Neutral	7.5	Neutral	14.6
	Disagree	0	Disagree	4.9
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	0

Table 8 (*Continued*). China's normative action

Variable	Indonesia		Hungary	
	Response	Percentage	Response	Percentage
China should resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law.	Strongly Agree	37.9	Strongly Agree	42.9
	Agree	50	Agree	28.6
	Neutral	10.9	Neutral	23.8
	Disagree	0.6	Disagree	4.8
	Strongly Disagree	0.6	Strongly Disagree	0
China should make bilateral trade truly mutually beneficial by addressing trade imbalances.	Strongly Agree	31	Strongly Agree	16.7
	Agree	52.9	Agree	42.9
	Neutral	14.4	Neutral	31
	Disagree	1.7	Disagree	7.1
	Strongly Disagree	0	Strongly Disagree	2.4

On the Indonesian side, it can be seen that the variables relating to China's role in development and China's future relations with Indonesia are significant with China's influence in Indonesia. The influence of China in participating in Indonesia's development is getting stronger. As noted earlier, flagship infrastructure projects (the Sumedang dam, the Jakarta–Bandung rail, and nickel processing investments) shape perceptions of China's role: one that is felt to be beneficial by the community. This is especially the case on the island of Java, which is home to the majority of the Indonesian population.

Table 9. Indonesian perception

Iteration 0: log pseudolikelihood = **-86.894481**
 Iteration 1: log pseudolikelihood = **-74.705738**
 Iteration 2: log pseudolikelihood = **-73.616524**
 Iteration 3: log pseudolikelihood = **-73.609386**
 Iteration 4: log pseudolikelihood = **-73.609385**

Logistic regression	Number of obs	=	172
	Wald chi2(6)	=	20.13
	Prob > chi2	=	0.0026
Log pseudolikelihood = -73.609385	Pseudo R2	=	0.1529

influence	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
development	1.734527	.418464	4.14	0.000	.9143527	2.554702
democracy	-.1111747	.5304252	-0.21	0.834	-1.150789	.9284395
china_future	.7648792	.4500124	1.70	0.089	-.1171289	1.646887
demo_awarnes	.6903238	.9289869	0.74	0.457	-1.130457	2.511105
china_worse	45.53513	40.72382	1.12	0.264	-34.28208	125.3523
china_better	-31.22541	56.51948	-0.55	0.581	-142.0015	79.55073
_cons	-.6238818	.7739477	-0.81	0.420	-2.140791	.8930277

On the other hand, the Hungarian side exhibits more focus on the absence of democracy in China, and on China's negative influence, although Hungarians are in a similar position with Indonesians in that they agree that China's role in Hungary's development is significant and positive. Hungary is not only concerned with the aspects of beneficial cooperation, especially in terms of development, but other aspects, especially democratic values and normative actions that should be implemented by China, and must be applied to strengthen relations between the two countries because Hungarians have a higher awareness than Indonesians regarding the importance of democratization and a more normative foreign policy.

Table 10. Hungarian perception

Iteration 0:	log pseudolikelihood = -29.700593				
Iteration 1:	log pseudolikelihood = -15.133242				
Iteration 2:	log pseudolikelihood = -14.823324				
Iteration 3:	log pseudolikelihood = -14.813368				
Iteration 4:	log pseudolikelihood = -14.813351				
Iteration 5:	log pseudolikelihood = -14.813351				
Logistic regression		Number of obs	=	43	
		Wald chi2(6)	=	14.44	
		Prob > chi2	=	0.0251	
Log pseudolikelihood = -14.813351		Pseudo R2	=	0.5012	

influence	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	z	P> z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
development	5.141992	2.114232	2.43	0.015	.9981736	9.285811
democracy	2.512399	1.043325	2.41	0.016	.46752	4.557277
china_future	2.032134	1.495849	1.36	0.174	-.8996763	4.963945
demo_awarnes	-7.479529	4.676621	-1.60	0.110	-16.64554	1.686479
china_worse	-20.83305	9.821755	-2.12	0.034	-40.08334	-1.582763
china_better	-22.37393	15.17865	-1.47	0.140	-52.12355	7.375684
_cons	2.699717	2.917619	0.93	0.355	-3.018711	8.418145

5. Conclusions

Indonesia and Hungary are strategic partners of China in Central Europe and in Southeast Asia. The closeness of these two countries to China is illustrated not only by the warm relationship that Xi Jinping enjoys with Jokowi and Orbán, but also by the many strategic BRI projects run by China in both countries. While neither Indonesia nor Hungary wants to become ensnared by China in debt trap diplomacy, they are aware of the mutual benefits that come from being Beijing's strategic partners.

This is also reflected in the perception of the people in both countries in seeing China as a country that plays a role in the development of their country.

In general, people in both countries see China's influence as more positive than negative. However, people in both countries agree significantly that China's role in development increases China's influence. Indonesians see better Indonesia-China relations in the future, which will increase China's influence. Survey responses suggest that Hungarians are more concerned about democratic values and want to see less negative Chinese actions internationally before they will be amenable to an increase of China's influence in their country.

This research serves as a foundation for future inquiries that could build upon it by using a more representative sample of people in both countries. Moreover, such future research can be done qualitatively by making a comparison of expert opinions related to Indonesia-China and Hungary-China relations. An appreciation of how China is perceived in Indonesia and Hungary can be instrumental in facilitating a greater understanding of the relationship China has with these two countries. Moreover, such knowledge is instrumental in better equipping policymakers to chart their future engagements, trade, and negotiations with Beijing.

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This study complied with all applicable ethical standards. An informed consent was obtained from all survey participants in both countries prior to data collection.

Notes

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