


Article

Chinese VFR Travel in Budapest: The Hosts' Roles

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Abstract: In recent decades, there has been a dynamic growth of Chinese outbound tourism to the Central and Eastern European region, and Hungary has been one of the most visited countries. This increase in demand is linked, in part, to the important Chinese diaspora in Hungary whose members play the role of hosts in VFR travel. This paper aims to explore the social relations—guanxi—within the Chinese diaspora living in Budapest and its influence on VFR travels back and forth China. Results of the survey with 202 Chinese immigrants reveal the strong nexus between migration and VFR travel. The Chinese hosts who have been living in the country for two decades behave differently in their guanxi compared to those who have settled in Budapest recently. The article provides several practical contributions to local destination management organizations and tourism service providers to successfully reach Chinese hosts, such as providing commissions, coupons, and getting discounts.

Keywords: visiting friends and relatives; VFR travel; Chinese hosts; Hungary; guanxi



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1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the role of guanxi in social relations and its influence on Chinese VFR travel in Hungary. Visiting friends and relatives tourism has turned out to be an important market phenomenon, and studying the social bonds between Chinese people involved in VFR travel can provide new insights into this market segment. Understanding the impact of guanxi on VFR travel can help to better manage Chinese inbound tourism not only to Budapest but also to the major cities in the region.

The People's Republic of China is one of the main players in international migration and outbound tourism. Studies estimate between 30 and 50 million people of Chinese origin live in a country different from the People's Republic of China [1,2]. Almost every country in the world hosts a smaller or larger Chinese diaspora. In Central and Eastern Europe, Hungary hosts the largest Chinese diaspora, with more than 18,558 registered individuals [3].

Push and pull factors influence Chinese mobility and the social relations among Chinese people [4]. Chinese immigrants arrived in Hungary in two major waves, between 1988 and 1992 due to the visa waiver between the two countries [5], and between the 2013–2017 Settlement Bond period [6]. The first wave is strongly linked to a push factor, the policy of reform and opening-up, launched in 1978, which gradually made leaving China legally possible. On the other hand, the second wave, a pull factor, has been induced by the Hungarian government offering favorable settlement conditions to Chinese immigrants [6]. Applying a quantitative research design, this study investigates the VFR travel experiences of Chinese migrants residing in Budapest, Hungary. The research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus providing an interesting snapshot of how social relations evolved in this specific period when traveling was restricted. The main research question driving this study is: In what ways can Chinese hosts strengthen social relations and influence VFR travels?

VFR was seen by Larsen et al. [7] as a means for strengthening social networks and maintaining “social life at-a-distance”, in times when friends and relatives are geographically dispersed due to the motilities of modern life. This research is centered on Chinese hosts’ social relations in shaping VFR travels. By exploring Chinese hosts’ roles, this study responds to Backer et al. [8] call for a closer examination of the hosts’ point of view in VFR travel and provides new insights on Chinese immigrants as ‘tourism ambassadors’ of Budapest, Hungary. This study based on the nature of guanxi tries to fill an apparent gap in the literature by providing several practical guidelines for local destination management organizations and tourism service providers to successfully reach out to Chinese VFR hosts.

Prior studies on Chinese VFR travel evidenced the social relations (guanxi) [9] and family unit importance [10]. The present study adds to this literature. Firstly, this paper aims at studying a particular sample, Chinese immigrants living in Budapest (Hungary). This is significant because Hungary has just recently opened to Chinese immigration and tourism. Secondly, our study aims at analyzing a particular aspect, the role of guanxi in Chinese VFR travel. ‘Guanxi’ has been studied in business relations and management studies [11–13] to analyze social relations. Here, we suggest that the role of guanxi is relevant in stimulating Chinese VFR travel in Budapest.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Definition and Types of VFR Travel

Regarding the types of tourism, we distinguish between leisure and professional tourism [14], whereas a type of leisure tourism, we distinguish VFR travel, which refers to visiting friends and relatives. VFR travel is probably the oldest form of travel, as visiting friends and relatives has always been socially important [14,15], yet the scientific interest in VFR travel is recent. VFR travel cannot be considered a homogeneous market, as it can be divided into two sub-segments, visitors to friends (VF) and relatives (VR). Those who differ most in terms of their life cycle, gender, age, activities, and how they obtain information. In almost all the studies examining the two sub-segments, the number of VRs exceeded that of VFs [16]. Table 1 delineates the major characteristics of VFR travelers. A VFR tourist is a person whose relatives, friends, and acquaintances are important to visit, and this visit constitutes the major motivation for their travel [8,15].

Table 1. VFR types.

	Accommodation: Friends and Family	Accommodation: Commercial
Purpose of Visit: VFR	☑ PVFRs	☑ CVFRs
Purpose of Visit: Non-VFR	☑ EVFRs	✗ Non-VFRs

Source: Own editing based on Backer’s [15] manuscript (p. 63).

According to Table 1, pure VFR (PVFR) travelers are those whose primary travel purpose is to visit friends and relatives [15]. Exploiting VFRs (EVFRs) stay with their friends and relatives, but this is not the purpose of their visit, e.g., to identify themselves as vacationers. Commercial VFRs (CVFRs) are those who come specifically to visit their friends and relatives and use commercial accommodations. In the fourth quadrante non-VFR segment represents non-VFR travelers [15].

To know the true magnitude of a VFR travel, the destination must identify and summarize the three types of VFR. Official statistics on the true magnitude of VFR travel do not provide an adequate measure, as only two of the three VFR types are recorded, underestimating the true magnitude of VFR travel. The VFR travel is a special market segment of hidden tourism, which can also be considered a black box of tourism statistics for invisible tourism activities [17].

2.2. Characteristics of VFR Travel

Nearly three decades ago, Jackson [18] drew attention to the importance of VFR travel and, on the other hand, emphasized its underestimation and neglect. Over the past 30 years, several articles have been published on VFR travel; however, there is still little research on its importance, and it receives unfairly little attention compared to other tourism products. In addition, only a few scientific monographs explore VFR travels, and the path-making book on the subject was published in 2015 [19].

Most initial research usually collected data according to the purpose of the travel, but not all travelers with friends or relatives mention VFR as a traditional destination, presumably identifying as vacationers or business visitors [20]. Some VFR travelers do not engage in touristic activities; thus, technically, they are not tourists (i.e., flying for a funeral and staying at least one night and not undertaking leisure components) [15,20]. VFR travelers are generally assumed to be in the homes of only friends and relatives they have visited. In contrast, VFR travelers also use the commercial accommodation sector [21].

From an economic point of view, VFR travel enjoys a secondary status in the tourism industry [22]. The VFR traveler is often seen as having little tourist activity and no spending on accommodation, thus having a minimal impact on the local economy [20,22]. These findings distort reality, as the daily expenditure of VFR travelers may indeed be lower, but this may be offset by the fact that they stay at the destination for a longer period [23]. Economic impact studies sometimes fail to consider the breadth of VFR expenditures of the recipient, which can also be significant—retail, restaurants, and tourist attractions—thus generating significant additional revenue for the local economy [20,21]. VFR travelers participate in shopping, sightseeing, hospitality, and airline services, and are therefore valuable and important elements of the tourism industry in each region [24].

Tourism marketers have seen VFR as a form of tourism that occurs naturally and cannot be influenced [21,25]. VFR travelers have unique characteristics in terms of seeking information about their trip planning, relying heavily on word-of-mouth communication than other marketing tools [21,26]. The actively used Chinese social relations play a key role in VFR travel. It can be assured that it is activated before or after the trip, or even during the trip.

Tourism seasonality is a composite socio-economic phenomenon of high complexity but can promote complex network analysis in the study of socio-economic systems [27]. VFR travel has proven to be more resilient in difficult economic times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and less prone to seasonality compared to business and leisure markets [27]. The reduced seasonal aspect increases the stabilizing effect of the local economy, i.e., their out-of-season visit has a positive effect on the local economy.

2.3. Role Change: Guests and Hosts

VFR travel is a unique embodiment of tourism, which can also involve the host in tourism activities, and has a distinctive effect on the local economy, such as shopping, which is one of the most important tourist activities for Chinese travelers [28]. The shopping activities are usually organized by the hosts; therefore, a customized approach is required to optimize the customer experience for specific products consumed contexts [29]. VFR travel includes the unique interaction of the host as well as the economic contribution and market potential of the destinations [30]. 'The host in VFR is someone who has had friends and or relatives visit and stayed at least one night in their destination' [31]. The most important aspect of the definition is that a traveler does not need to be with friends or relatives to identify the host as a VFR host. The attitude of the hosts can influence the development of tourism experiences and desires, even if VFR travelers have different motivations [17].

Hosts play a significant role in VFR travel, though very few VFR studies deal with host–guest relationships [32]. Yet during VFR travel, hosts have a vital role to play in centrally determining the nature of the trip, the transit routes, and the tourist sub-areas in which the VFR participates. VFR tourists rely heavily on the advice of friends and relatives when choosing a destination and do not necessarily rely on traditional promotions [33]. In

the case of Hungary as well, the stay of VFR tourists is managed to a certain extent, and they probably coordinate their leisure activities in consultation with their hosts [8,15].

With the help of hosts, VFR travelers can also take part in activities carried out by residents that other travelers would not be able to, so this can only be mentioned because of VFR travel [21]. VFR travelers usually involve locals in the exploration of the destination and its surroundings, i.e., the direct or indirect economic contribution of the hosts is also potentially significant [32].

2.4. *The Chinese VFR Travel: Guanxi*

Guanxi is a traditional Chinese concept of human relationships that refers to relationships between individuals or social relations that are based on mutual interests and benefits [34]. Confucius 2500 years ago named five human relationships—father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, friend-friend, and ruler-subject—that are more important than the individuals themselves. In everyday life, the essence of this teaching is that a perfectly self-realized individual ‘is not worth much’ if their human relationships are not properly maintained. Confucius’s relational, community-based philosophy is the driving force behind the relationship system in Chinese society [4].

Guanxi is also a variant form of social relations, and from a network perspective, these social relations are the connection between people and community groups [35–37]. It can be divided into many types, according to its base, for example, locality, kinship, classmate, and co-worker relations [11], where different types of guanxi provide different results [12]. According to Chen and Chen [12] guanxi refers to the ‘informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norms such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation’. Chinese VFR travel is worth examining along with social relations, using Huang Guangguo’s theory of social relations, in which he defines three types of connections [38]. The expressive relationship usually refers to the relationship between the individual and the family, the mixed relationship refers to the relationship between the individual and acquaintances—relatives and friends—, while the instrumental relationship refers to the relationship between the individual and strangers to obtain certain resources.

In many countries around the world, the Chinese have one of the largest immigrant diasporas. The tourist behavior of relatives and friends visiting them, as well as their travels to China, received little scientific attention. Chinese VFR travel is worth examining in terms of social relations—guanxi—[9] mostly through kinship, because the family relationship is the most important, stable, and intimate guanxi of all [38], especially in China [13]. In the last few years, although increasing the efforts to study guanxi in the tourism industry, notable gaps still exist [39], and these include studies of the family unit [10].

2.5. *Perspectives on Migration and VFR Travel*

2.5.1. Relationship between Migration and Chinese Diasporas

The creation of diasporas is the result of human movement, as emigration is a long-term feature of human activity for several reasons: environmental, social, economic, political, and security [40]. In VFR travel, the most frequent participants are migrants and their relatives and friends [41]. The structure of the social relations of a Chinese diaspora tourist is influenced by the place and collective identity, values and perceptions, responsibilities, and personal interests of the individual. Chinese diaspora tourism has a different impact on facilitating the building of social relations, depending on the type of social relation the immigrant has and the strength and depth of relationships it has [4]. The Chinese diaspora community and tourism are diverse and dynamic, reflecting the migration history, personal experiences, cultural exposures, social relations, and mobility of both the individual and the family [42].

2.5.2. Chinese Diaspora Living in Hungary

Reviewing the immigration waves of the Chinese diaspora living in Hungary, we can see that the real size of those arriving in the so-called first wave (1988–1992) is difficult to determine; only estimated data are available, as the registration of immigrants was incomplete [5]. Forty thousand major immigrants are mentioned in connection with the first wave of Chinese [5], but official data recorded a total of 27,330 Chinese immigrants among the first wave [5]. In the following registered period (2000–2012), examining the data of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO) “Immigrant foreign citizens by continents and countries (2000–)”, an average of 1000 Chinese immigrants arrived in Hungary every year. A total of 14,127 people arrived in the four years that can be considered the second wave in the Settlement Bond period (2013–2017) [3]. It should be noted, however, that not all the latter came with the purchase of the bond. According to the Ministry of the Interior, in the mentioned period (2013–2017), 4095 Chinese citizens received a residence permit, with whom 7278 family members arrived; thus, a total of 11,373 Chinese immigrants arrived in Hungary having the Settlement Bond as a pull factor [43]. According to the Central Statistical Office, 10,114 officially registered Chinese immigrants were in Hungary at the end of 2012 and 18,558 at the end of 2021 [3].

Before 1989, the end of the socialist regime in Hungary, this country has not been considered a receiving country. For this reason, the arrival of Chinese immigrants has attracted the interest of social scientists who have documented the phenomena over the years. Accordingly, the Chinese immigrants are relatively scattered. Chinese are settled mainly in Budapest—the capital city with 1.7 million inhabitants—and the most numerous settlements are in five out of the 22 districts of Budapest (these are the VIII., IX., X., XV., and XVI. districts). Compared to other major European cities hosting Chinese immigrants, no ‘Chinatowns’ have been created in Budapest [44]. The lack of this is due to urban segmentation, recent Chinese immigrants, and the special economic and social environment of the host country [45]. In the first wave, the pull factor to come to Hungary was the possibility to become an entrepreneur in a country in great need of products and services [44]. Other pull factors were the investment and trade opportunities in Hungary and the possibility to increase revenues. Chinese immigrants have been mainly engaged in trade-related activities—wholesale and retail of clothing and footwear—and hospitality [5].

The number of Chinese tourists visiting Hungary has increased since 2010 (Table 2). The interest of Chinese tourists to visit Budapest has created new services in the city. Several Chinese migrants residing in Budapest have started operating as service providers such as travel arrangements, guided tours, interpreting, and bus rental. In many cases, Chinese tourists visiting Hungary have already visited one or more Western European countries [28], typically visiting Hungary for a few days on a multi-country cruise, which explains the relatively low average length of stay.

Table 2. Visitor turnover indicators of Chinese tourists arriving in Hungary, 2010–2020.

Year	Number of Chinese Guests	Change (%)	Number of Chinese Guest Nights	Change (%)	The Average Length of Stay (Nights)
2010	44,975	16.5	79,767	11.6	1.7
2011	58,386	29.8	116,103	45.5	2.0
2012	72,090	23.5	127,903	10.2	1.8
2013	74,939	4.0	138,554	8.3	1.8
2014	89,961	20.0	160,700	16.0	1.8
2015	125,857	39.9	222,540	38.5	1.8
2016	171,835	36.5	302,107	35.8	1.8
2017	230,736	34.3	367,424	21.6	1.6
2018	256,656	11.2	426,348	16.0	1.8
2019	277,389	8.1	456,048	7.0	1.6
2020	21,317	−92.3	44,984	−91.1	2.1

Source: own editing based on data provided by the Chief Tourism Adviser, Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade/China-CEE Tourism Coordination Centre in Budapest, Hungary.

In 2019, Budapest won the Best European Destination award which confirms the Hungarian capital city's leading role in tourism. Budapest has been a cultural destination with vivid nightlife, proud of its tangible and intangible heritage, and its popular annual festivals generating millions of tourists [46]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, China was one of the most dynamic sending markets in Budapest, producing a double-digit annual growth.

3. Research Methodology

In attempting to answer the main research question, in what ways can Chinese hosts residing in Budapest strengthen social relations and influence VFR travels, a structured online questionnaire survey was designed. Quantitative analysis using a survey was deemed appropriate to conduct this study because this allowed to gather data from Chinese immigrants living in Budapest. Other studies in VFR travel used surveys [8,17,47]. The first author of this study has been an entrepreneur specializing in Chinese inbound tourism in Hungary since 2006. Her observations on Chinese VFR travel and pluriennial experience in travel organizations are at the base of the survey design and scale development.

Sample: Participants who were born in the People's Republic of China and have been living in Hungary for more than a year were contacted. The sample ($n = 202$) was gathered using the snowball technique [48], which had the advantages of shortening the time and diminishing the cost to gain a sufficient size participant group efficiently [49]. Snowball sampling is a particularly effective tool when trying to obtain information on delicate issues of social relations among Chinese immigrants. The sampling was initiated via the researchers' acquaintances and started a snowball by contacting respondents personally known by them to fit the research criteria [50]. After asking them to help locate new respondents and start additional referral chains. These persons can more easily develop referral chains because they may already be aware of potential respondents [50]. It strengthens guanxi's snowball sampling technique, which is based on trust, as the Chinese, who form a highly closed community living away from home in a foreign environment, would not have been available otherwise. The descriptive analysis showed a balanced ratio between male (57.9%) and female (42.1%) respondents. Most participants (94.1%) resided in Budapest. Respondents were between 40 and 59 years (66.8%) and 25–39 (22.3%). Of the respondents, 14.4% were first-wave immigrants (1988–1992), while 19.8% arrived with the second wave (2013–2017). Overall, 53.5% of respondents have been living in the country for decades. Our sample is not representative; however, if we consider that in 2021 18,558 Chinese migrants living in Hungary, research participants constitute more than 1% of the Chinese.

Research instrument: The structured online survey in Chinese was used to collect data. The structure of the questionnaire was based on the literature review and adapted to fit the current study. The questionnaire was designed in Hungarian and later translated into Chinese by the first author. To ease communication, simplified Chinese characters were adopted. Translation equivalence was assured by back-translation of the Chinese version into Hungarian. This allowed us to correct minor language inconsistencies. To assure reliability the survey was tested with a pilot study ($n = 5$). To minimize the risk of lack of scale validity, we did the following. Before the final delineation of the items, the survey was tested in a pilot study to ensure reliability through personal links. Five individuals of Chinese nationality were asked to participate in the pretesting procedure with a talk-aloud protocol. The pilot test was carried out in a Chinese restaurant in Budapest, where the first author sat next to the participants as they read the answer options aloud and said whether they thought the survey questions were unambiguous. Unclear statements were removed, and the wording of the items was improved accordingly. The final questions were built on previous literature and a pilot study's results. Many of the survey items had been pre-validated by other researchers. Two platforms were used for survey distribution: the WeChat Questionnaire Survey within the WeChat application. Most Chinese in Budapest use WeChat. Since participants complained about the survey link received (stuttering, not loading), we switched to the Survey Monkey questionnaire program. Data gathering occurred in October 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel restrictions were in

due. Data gathering started 10 days after the pilot study. The survey completion time was around ten-fifteen minutes to avoid respondents' fatigue.

Scales: Four multi-item scales (35 items) were self-developed based on the tenets of VFR literature, and were adapted from previous studies (see for example [8,17,26,47,51]). Participants were asked to rate the items on a 5-point scale reflecting on their experience as VFR host and guest (1 = completely true, 5 = not true at all). The scales aimed to assess (1) the communication within guanxi, (2) their VFR host role, (3) their VFR guest experience when in China, and (4) their overall VFR and immigration experience. The scale assessing VFR hosts' role is the focus of this study. It was developed by Backer's [47] residents' survey, which includes items containing the information of the VFR hosts. The nine items aimed to assess Chinese hosts' role in host-guest interactions and hosts' active role in entertaining their guests: 'My relatives/friends visit me regularly', 'They spend the night in my home', 'They stay overnight in a hotel', 'They eat at my home', 'They eat in a restaurant', 'I show them the main attractions of my place of residence', 'I show them the main attractions of the country', 'I tell them it's good to live here' and 'I try to convince them to move to Hungary'. Scale reliability is good, the Cronbach Alpha of the items was 0.83, further indicating strong reliability as well as convergent validity.

Data analysis: The study investigated the influence of social relations on VFR travels back and forth to China within the Chinese diaspora living in Budapest. The model was tested using Principal Component Analysis, which is a commonly used multivariate statistical analysis method. This data dimension reduction algorithm is generally applied to feature extraction [52].

4. Results

The discussion of the results is based on the tenets of the analyzed literature [4,8,31,47,51]. A Chinese host residing in Budapest can strengthen its social relations and influence VFR travels in this way by continuing Chinese behavioral patterns of social norms. To support this, the findings are structured: (1) to assess Chinese hosts' role in VFR travel, (2) Chinese social relations (guanxi) in VFR, and (3) the role of the household.

4.1. Chinese Hosts' Role in VFR Travel

Our findings reveal that Chinese hosts strongly influence and shape their relatives' and friends' tourism activities and experiences in Budapest. Chinese hosts are willing to play the role of tour guides and provide accommodation to VFR travelers.

The nine items to assess Chinese hosts' role were factor analyzed using principal components analysis (PCA), with varimax rotation for factor extraction. A sample size of 200 is considered a fair sample size for PCA [53]. Three items with cross-loadings and low communality were dropped. The KMO measure of sampling competence value was 0.708 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was 570.211 ($p < 0.001$), indicating data are suitable for PCA. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$) of the one extracted factor reached above the required threshold of 0.70. For the multi-collinearity test among the items using the variance inflation factor (VIF), all the VIF values were under the threshold of 5 [53]. The eigenvalues range from 3.14 to 1.01, and 69% of the variance in the data was explained by the two factors (Table 3). The Chinese hosts' role in showing VFR travelers the main attractions in Hungary ($M = 4.37$) and in Budapest where the hosts reside ($M = 4.25$) were the most relevant activities. Chinese hosts usually guide VFR travelers in Budapest, showing their guests the city's main attractions. In contrast, providing VFR travelers with accommodation (They spend the night in my home) was rated as the least relevant activity ($M = 2.71$).

Table 3. The Chinese hosts' role in VFR travel as 'tourist welcome and tourist guide ambassadors'.

Items	Factor Loadings	
	Tourist Welcome Ambassador	Tourist Guide Ambassador
My relatives/friends visit me regularly in Hungary	0.824	
They spend the night in my home	0.674	
I try to convince them to move to Hungary	0.705	
I show them the main attractions of my place of residence		0.928
I show them the main attractions of the country		0.945
I tell them it's good to live here		0.587
KMO: 0.708; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 570.211 (0.001)		

Note: items were measured with a 5-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = fully agree).

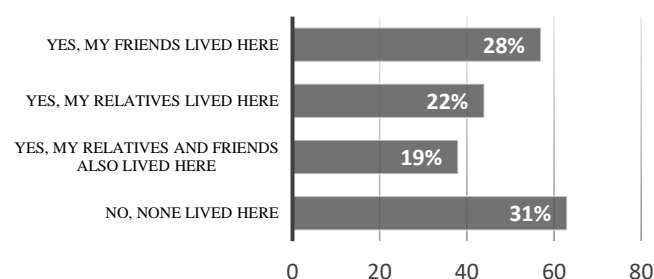
Factors were labeled as 'tourist welcome ambassador' and 'tourist guide ambassador', which were set up from the items. 'Tourist welcome ambassador' is the Chinese host who regularly hosts his relatives and friends, does it all in his own house, and tries to convince him to move to Hungary. 'Tourist guide ambassador' is the Chinese host who actively shows the place of residence and the country's main attractions and tells them it's good to live here. These results support Shani-Uriely's [54] research that those who "go out" with their guests to tourist attractions appear to contribute more to the local tourism industry than those who avoid "going out".

4.2. Chinese Social Relations (Guanxi) in VFR

The social role of Chinese hosts is concentrated along with the guanxi network, in which residents as an attraction "pulling" friends and family to visit and promote the attractions of the region [33]. Given that Hungary has recently turned to be a receiving country, it is relevant to explore the social relations of Chinese immigrants choosing this country. Studies show that those Chinese immigrants who already had relatives and friends living in Hungary could build on their guanxi and their previous tourist experiences provided them with impressions and information about Hungary. Thus, VFR travels strengthened social relations and provided the Chinese with important support in the later move here.

Our results reveal that 69% of the respondents had important social relations before settling in Hungary (Figure 1). This confirms that the settlement of a Chinese person in each destination is greatly influenced by relatives and friends already living there. The wide social relations (guanxi) characteristics of Chinese culture play an important role in people's lives. Prior research and the first author's observation showed that Chinese people use their expressive, mixed, and instrumental relationships when they consider settling in Europe. Accordingly, social relations are also built through the narratives of Chinese already living in Hungary. Such narratives might have influenced relatives and friends to come to live in Budapest, where their social relations are already established.

VFR relationships before settling in Hungary

**Figure 1.** VFR relationships of Chinese immigrants before settling in Hungary.

The accession to the European Union (2004) was a milestone in Hungary's history. Hungary's making part of the Schengen area has provided new pull factors for Chinese immigrants choosing to settle in this Central and Eastern European country [44]. Our findings reveal that Chinese hosts' roles differ significantly according to the period of their settlement in Budapest. Chinese hosts who arrived with the first wave (1988–2003) are more active either as 'Tourists host ambassadors' or 'Tourist guide ambassadors'. Overall, those arriving in Hungary before the EU access are typically willing to invest more time and energy in their social relations and play the role of hosts in VFR. This result is supported by the first author's observations within the Chinese community: those who live in Budapest for a longer period are more confident to guide their VFR guests, have better Hungarian language skills, and have more solid guanxi with local Hungarians.

4.3. The Role of Household

As Figure 2 shows, the average size of Chinese households was 3.84. Compared to data related to the average size of households in Mainland China (2.62) [55], Chinese households in Budapest are larger (Figure 2).

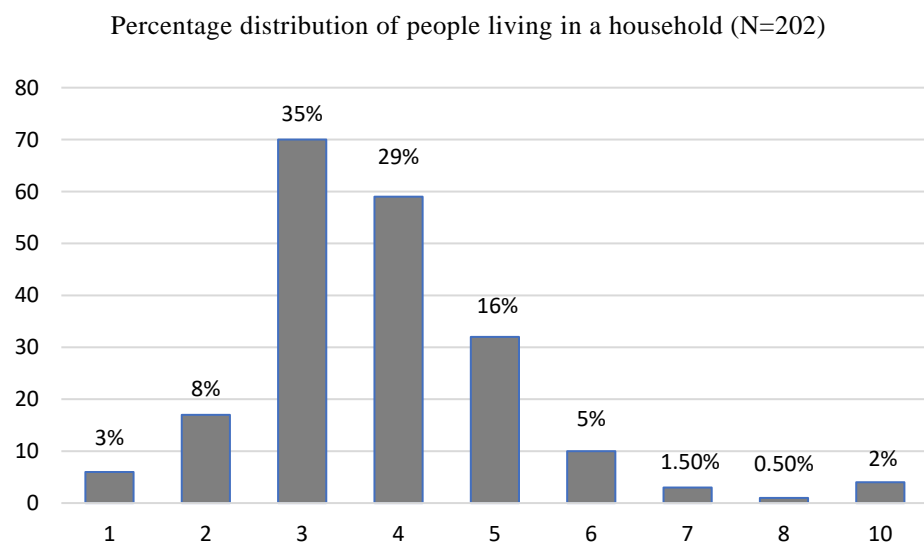


Figure 2. Chinese hosts, participants in this survey, have been living in large households (2% even with ten people).

Prior studies showed that Chinese living in Budapest have two or more children and different generations coexist in a household [44]. In addition, for most Chinese immigrants, having a large household is often a symbol of a successful life. Results evidence that the more numerous a Chinese household is, the more likely Chinese hosts to narrate that 'it is good to live in Budapest ($p = 0.000$), where the Chi-square test took a value of 72.436 ($df = 32$). The Cramer-V value for the closeness of the data (0.299) shows a weaker than the average significant result.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

This paper aims to explore the social relations –guanxi– within the Chinese diaspora living in Budapest and its influence on VFR travels back and forth China. Chinese VFR travel should be examined from the perspective of guanxi, which is the driving force behind the family unit and personal network of relationships.

The Chinese society and community (simply because of the size of the population and the colors of the diaspora) might reveal different perceptions and behavioral styles about hospitality. The findings presented above provide insight and empirical support to several observations of VFR travel studies and provide practical contributions to Chinese VFR host tourism. Chinese hosts and guests actively use their expressive, mixed, and instrumental

relationships, which confirms the usefulness of Huang's [38] theory of social relations in this context. Our results show that Chinese VFR travelers, compared to Chinese outbound tourists, spend a longer period in Hungary and have higher expenses. These findings are in line with previous studies which show that hosts play a key role in VFR travel [8,31]. In addition, considering the intensity of Chinese hosts' social relations in kinship, these findings are relevant in the Hungarian context where tourism service providers have just recently opened to the Chinese market.

Having identified the two factors 'tourist welcome ambassador' and 'tourist guide ambassador' may help local destination management organizations and tourism service providers in designing and promoting the tourism products for Chinese VFR hosts. It would be worthwhile to offer Chinese hosts unique tourism products to capture their interest and attention. When visiting the attractions with friends and relatives, they could get commissions after buying products, especially luxury or famous Hungarian products.

Networking highlights how tourism is a social practice that involves traveling, visiting, guiding, hosting, and so on [7]. From the perspective of local destination management organizations and tourism service providers, it is important to be aware that due to the strong network of contacts in *guanxi*, good practices spread very quickly within the community, so a rapid increase in demand for it is almost guaranteed. This requires studying their culture and speaking their language so that they can get involved in promoting the products and services because Chinese hosting is a social function based on relationships. The power of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic WOM is unmatched through Chinese VFR travel networks [56].

In Budapest, the size of Chinese immigrant households is larger compared to those in Mainland China. For many, having a large household evidences a good quality of life. This finding is also in line with previous studies [31]. Chinese hosts with a large household are considered successful in the eyes of relatives and friends who come to visit them. The bigger size of the household is conceived as a strategy that enhances income accumulation, and risk resilience and ultimately contributes to household survival in an unfamiliar environment. Maintaining a larger household potentially provides a greater opportunity to accommodate relatives and friends during visits. The host experience has gratifying benefits, such as the joy of being with their relatives and friends, and a sense of pride either regarding their altruistic personality or their place of living [54]. The average household size in the Chinese diaspora is 3.84, and the total Chinese population is 18,558 in Hungary, yielding an estimated 4833 potential host households, which local services providers must reckon with.

During each VFR travel, tourism experiences and consumption play an important role, in which the experience of tour guide behavior is emphasized. The Chinese, who settled in Hungary before joining the EU (2004), are more active in the hospitality of VFR, a deeper understanding of which could be explained by later qualitative research. The importance of social relations (*guanxi*) does not change over time which can be considered the basis of the Chinese system of relations. The unique role of Chinese VFR hosts should be further explored from the perspective of cultural and personal dimensions.

6. Limitations and Implications

This study has some limitations. First, survey participants were mostly living in Budapest, and Chinese living in other important tourist destinations of Hungary, such as towns around Lake Balaton, might provide new insights. Second, data were gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic when travel was severely restricted and many—either in Mainland China or in Europe—were in lockdown. In the future, we plan to use qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with Chinese VFR hosts to further explore their viewpoints.

This study provides important managerial implications for local service providers. However, for the sake of successful marketing communication, it would be for them most appropriate to appear on an online platform operated and actively used by the Chinese

diaspora. In many cases, Chinese VFRs can only be accessed through their relatives because they tend to rely on their relatives as their primary source of information. Chinese citizens who settled in Hungary during different immigration periods are of key importance as VFR hosts. Their role is very important for Chinese VFR travel in Hungary, so more emphasis should be placed on their achievement and involvement. Chinese VFR hosts can significantly influence the attractions visited by their guests as well as the activities they make at the destination. Thus, it would be useful for local destination management organizations and tourism service providers to run a proactive marketing campaign aimed at motivating Chinese immigrants to actively participate as VFR hosts and to identify places to visit and upcoming events to help manage VFR activities. Greater attention should be paid to mining data on Chinese VFR travel patterns, shopping preferences, and hospitality activities. This type of skill would create a platform for more strategic marketing to the Chinese diaspora by the local destination management organizations and tourism service providers located in the markets. It provides an opportunity to create market campaigns that are tied to their travel patterns. This educational campaign aimed at the local tourism supply sectors—attractions, tour operators, event planners, transport, and restaurants—would address the imperative of the industry valorizing this segment as a potential customer. This concept in practice is not without its challenges. It is recommended to involve a person with Chinese tourism expertise.

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