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Head of Program: Prof. Attila Oláh CSc

*Socialization and Social Processes Programme*

Head of Program: Prof. György Hunyady MHAS

**Cultural embeddedness of competition and learning, and the  
effect of immigration on conceptualization**

Summary  
of the doctoral (PhD) dissertation

**Nóra Sebestyén**

Supervisor:

Prof. Márta Fülöp DSc



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## INTRODUCTION

Competition and learning are highly important and strongly intertwined concepts promoting societal progress and successful immigration. Education contributes to societal development and competitive advantage (Human Development Report, 2014). Moreover, competition (e.g. academic competition) is prevalent in the whole educational system and it is an inevitable part of student life (e.g. Fülöp, 2008). There is also extensive research on the effect of competition, winning and losing on academic motivation and achievement (Dweck & Elliott, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 1974, 1989; Van Nuland & mtsai, 2014). Besides the importance and interconnected nature of competition and learning, there are cultural differences in how societies construct the concepts. Studies focusing on the cultural foundation of conceptualization were typically carried out in Eastern and Western cultures (Li, 2012). Hungary is mostly underrepresented in cross-cultural studies (Fülöp, 2013). Hungarian characteristics of learning have not been investigated yet. In addition, while learning and competition may influence the process of immigration there is no study so far that explored the meaning structure of these concepts in cultural transition. In the dissertation we address this lack in the literature and investigate the conceptualization of competition and learning among Hungarian, Chinese and Chinese immigrant students.

## THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

### **Cultural embeddedness of competition and learning**

The Chinese educational system is highly competitive. Intense competition takes place on every level of education involving all actors (i.e. teachers, students, schools) in the field (Kai, 2012). The main driving force behind competition is the National Higher Educational Entrance Examination, known as *gaokao*; a highly competitive examination that determines the future of students. In China, academic achievement (e.g. grades, test scores) is strongly linked to social mobility and future success (Li, 2012).

Traditional cross-cultural research frequently investigates China as an East-Asian country, thus Chinese characteristics of learning and competition have also been widely studied (Li, 2012; Watkins, 2007). The studies report that competition is perceived in a positive way in China, moreover motivational aspect, especially effort and intense struggle are emphasized in the conceptualization (Fülöp, 2013). Chinese mindset is characterized by effort orientation (Li, 2012). Both success and failure are attributed dominantly to effort; moreover effort is also a key component of the Chinese learning model (Li, 2003, 2012). There is an elaborated script of effort in East Asian cultural context, in which hard work always contributes to achievement (Mukaida et al., 2011). Confucian philosophy and collectivistic values also influence Chinese conceptualization (Hwang, 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2008).

Hungarian educational system is competitive, similarly to the Chinese practice. However, education and academic achievement are not linked so strongly to success in Hungary compared to China (Szabó, 2012). Over the past 20 years, the Hungarian characteristics of competition have been extensively investigated and compared to other cultures by Márta

Fülöp in a complex and systematic way (Fülöp, 2013). The studies show that competition is perceived in a negative way, mostly associated with negative emotions, aggression and conflict. Moreover, the subjective meaning of competition is strongly outcome-oriented, typically related to winning (Fülöp, 2013). Contrary to China, Hungarian discourse of success does not emphasize merits and virtues such as effort and endurance of hardship. Success and winning are typically achieved by aggression, relationships and immoral means rather than hard work (e.g. Szabó, 2012). Additionally, losing does not evoke effort; failure is typically related to pessimism and negative emotions (Fülöp & Berkics, 2003; Fülöp, 2013). Even the social-historical discourse fosters helplessness and victim-identity (László & Fülöp, 2011). In Hungary, effort is typically represented without results. Although competition has been investigated extensively, there are no studies concerning the general Hungarian approach to learning, except for those focusing on its specific aspects (e.g. motivation - Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Sebestyén 2009; Józsa, 2007; attitude - Csapó, 2000). These studies suggest that learning is characterized by individualistic tendencies and instrumental motivation in Hungary; the main driving force of learning is to enhance employment opportunities (Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Szigeti Tóth, 2009; Sebestyén 2009)

Studies investigated the cultural foundation of conceptualization were typically carried out in majority societies within borders, there is no study that investigated immigrants who leave the home country and get in the middle of different belief systems between the host and home cultures. However, given the increasing rate of immigration the issue is especially relevant (Rédei, 2007).

Today, China is one of the top sending countries; the expected number of overseas Chinese is 50 million (Irimiás, 2009). The number of Chinese immigrants who live in Hungary is also significant (approx. 10 000 Chinese immigrants). They are considered as the largest third country nationals and the largest group of visible minorities (Nyíri, 2010). Moreover, there is also a considerable number of Chinese immigrant students in the Hungarian educational system (Zatykó et al., 2013). Studies show that Chinese immigrants integrated relatively well into the economic life in Hungary (Nyíri, 2002). Moreover, Chinese immigrant parents are also relatively satisfied with their children's education (Nguyen Luu et al., 2009). There are just a few studies, however, that focused on Chinese immigrant students in Hungary from a pedagogical-psychological perspective (e.g. Borsfay, 2002), and the nature of conceptualization that lies behind their success is yet to be investigated.

## **THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE DISSERTATION**

As mentioned in the theoretical overview, Chinese and Hungarian concepts of learning and competition are different. Consequently, Chinese immigrants in Hungary are exposed to diverse belief systems. There is no study however, that investigated the conceptualization of Chinese immigrants. It is yet to be revealed how cultural encounter shapes the way they think about learning and competition. Furthermore, it is currently unknown whether their conceptualization is assimilated to that of the host country or their relative success is attributed to the maintained conceptualization of the home country.

Moreover, most studies have been compared Western cultures with Eastern ones, and acculturation has been typically investigated in multicultural societies with long history of immigration (Berry, 2003; Chen & Stevenson, 1995). There is a gap in the literature investigating the concepts of learning and competition in a Central European host country with relatively low immigration influx.

Based on the aforementioned arguments, the main goal of the dissertation was to investigate the effect of immigration on conceptualization of competition and learning, moreover to expand the scope of cross-cultural studies through exploring Hungary that has rarely been studied in comparative studies. We conducted three studies in order to address these issues. Study 1 revealed the Hungarian characteristics of concept of learning among young adults in comparison to the Chinese and American concepts of learning. Study 2 investigated the effect of immigration on the conceptualization of competition and learning among Hungarian, Chinese and Chinese immigrant students. Study 3 explored the concept of effort regarded as an important motivational component of competition and learning among Hungarian, Chinese and Chinese immigrant students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We used mixed methods in the dissertation. More specifically, quantification of qualitative data was carried out in order to reveal cultural characteristics in a statistically comparable way. In Study 1 and Study 2, association-based methods were used to investigate the meaning content and meaning structure of the concepts studied. Prototype method (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirston & O'Connor, 1987) was applied in Study 1, and Associative Group Analysis technique (AGA, Szalay & Brent, 1967) was used in Study 2. In Study 3, narrative technique was applied to investigate conceptualization on a deeper level revealing also behavioural information through recalling autobiographical memories related to effort. All methods are frequently used techniques in cross-cultural studies.

Acculturation was investigated in a cross-sectional design involving all actors in acculturation, namely host culture, home culture and immigrant groups. To investigate the influence of cultural exposure in a reliable way, the immigrant sample was divided into two subsamples based on the length of residence.

In the analyses, we compared the categories among samples in order to investigate the effect of acculturation. Additionally, we intended to capture sample specific patterns to increase cultural sensitivity.

Regarding procedure, data collection took place in Beijing and Budapest. Chinese immigrants were recruited from the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual Primary School and Hungarian majority schools in Budapest. The language of instruction in case of immigrants was bilingual (Mandarin Chinese and Hungarian). Analyses were conducted in Hungarian after culturally appropriate translation.

## **Study 1**

### **Cultural comparison of learning beliefs among Hungarian, Chinese and American young adults**

#### ***Purpose***

In order to investigate the effect of immigration thoroughly, culturally embedded information were needed in relation to both phenomena, learning and competition. There is an extensive research on the subjective meaning of competition in both China and Hungary. There are studies using the same method and the same theoretical framework in the investigation of the concept of competition (e.g. Fülöp, 2013; Watkins, 2007). However, studies exploring the cultural embeddedness of learning were carried out mostly in China and the USA; Hungarian characteristics of learning are still uncovered. Studies have identified two types of learning orientations so far: the first is ‘virtue orientation’ that is rooted in Confucian tenets and focuses on the moral and social aspects of learning; the second is ‘mind orientation’ that is based on ancient Greek philosophy and emphasizes the cognitive (intelligence and skills) and motivational basis of learning (Li, 2003, 2012). It is still a question whether there is a qualitatively different learning model in Hungary that is economically, politically and socially different from China and the US.

The goal of the first study was to reveal the Hungarian concept of learning and to compare it with the existing American and Chinese ones (Li, 2003).

#### ***Methods***

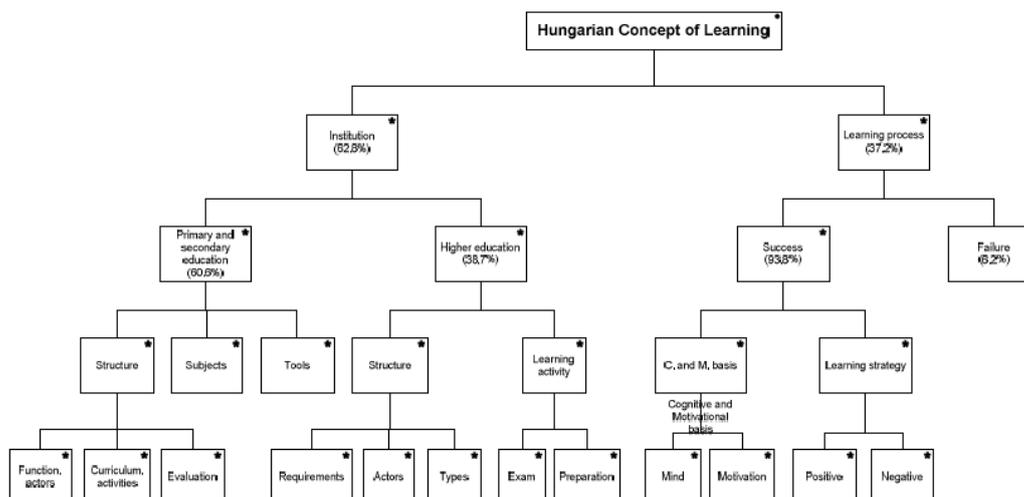
The Hungarian sample included 183 Hungarian young adults pursuing or have already completed their college education (122 female and 61 male; mean age: 24.8).

The prototype research method (Shaver et al., 1987) was used in the study, which was also adapted by Li (2003) to examine the American and Chinese concepts of learning. Using the same procedure made it possible to compare reliably the different concepts. The method involved two main steps: generating a list of learning-related terms and similarity-based sorting. The final structure of the concept was developed and visualized by hierarchical cluster analysis.

#### ***Results***

The results show that the Hungarian young adults perceived the concept of learning within the framework of formal education and placed greater emphasis on the different educational levels (primary/secondary and higher education) (see Figure 1.) than Chinese and American participants. Additionally, the concept was strongly related to performance orientation (e.g. degree and graduation). Distinct from the mind-oriented American (e.g. memory, skills, intelligence) and virtue-oriented Chinese (e.g. endurance of hardship, diligence, perseverance) models, the Hungarian learning concept is characterized by ‘instrumental orientation’ due to its strong association with outcome orientation and performance motivation.

**Figure 1. The hierarchical structure of the Hungarian concept of learning**  
 (The numbers indicate the percentage of items felt into the given category)



## Study 2

### Learning and competition in cultural transition

Studies focusing on the cultural foundation of learning and competition were mostly carried out in majority societies. Given the global importance of competition and the growing intensity of migration, the question arises how immigrants conceptualize competition and learning. Chinese immigrant students in Hungary are exposed to the belief systems of the home (China) and host culture (Hungary) that are highly different. In China, motivational aspects of the phenomena are emphasized with a double focus on the path and the goal, moreover there is an elaborated script of effort in which hard work is related to outcome (Fülöp, 2013; Li, 2012). In Hungary, instrumental-orientation is paired with (negative) emotions and moreover, effort is represented without results (Fülöp, 2013; Szabó, 2012). Besides the society-based investigations, it is unknown, how Chinese immigrant students in Hungary conceptualize competition and learning as a result of cultural encounter.

The aim of the present study was to reveal the subjective meaning of competition and learning among Hungarian, Chinese and Chinese immigrant students living in Hungary. Moreover, we aimed to investigate the effect of acculturation on the conceptualization.

Specific goals:

- to reveal similarities and differences of the subjective meanings among the samples
- to compare the subjective meanings within the sample in order to identify culture-specific characteristics
- to explore the effect of immigration on the subjective meanings

Does the subjective meaning of the Chinese immigrant students living in Hungary unique or show similarities with the Chinese (home culture) or the Hungarian (host culture) conceptualization?

- to uncover the effect of cultural exposure  
Are there any differences of the subjective meanings between the Chinese immigrants with longer and shorter length of residence?

### **Methods**

Altogether, 166 students (52 Chinese, 60 Hungarian and 54 Chinese immigrants) aged 13-15 years participated in the study (mean age: 13.9).

The Associative Group Analysis technique (AGA; Szalay & Brent, 1967) was used to reveal the subjective meanings. The students provided associations to a stimulus word in 1 minute and the associations were weighted and categorized to identify important meaning components. Altogether 7 stimulus words related to learning and competition were used: *competition, winning, losing, learning, teacher, school, effort*. All meaning category was characterized by a name referring its content and by a score indicating the sum score of the associations felt into the particular category. Higher the score more important part the category constitutes of the subjective meaning. Categorization was made by two independent coders.

### **Results**

The comparison of the subjective meanings resulted in three main aspects along which the samples can be characterized. The main aspects were motivation, emotion, and collectivism-individualism.

	<b>Hungarian</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>Chinese immigrants</b>
<i>Motivation</i>	Outcome orientation	Outcome and process orientation	Mixed
<i>Emotion</i>	Emotionally-loaded	Non emotional	Mixed
<i>Collectivism-Individualism</i>	Individualism	Collectivism	Moderate collectivism

Table 1. Culture/sample-specific characteristics of conceptualization

The conceptualization of the Hungarian sample was outcome-orientated, emotionally saturated; moreover it was characterized by individualistic tendencies.

The conceptualization of the Chinese sample emphasized motivation (both process and outcome orientation) without emotions. Moreover, collectivistic tendencies (e.g. interpersonal and societal meaning components) consequently appeared in the subjective meanings.

In the Chinese immigrant sample, the results showed that acculturation had an effect on the subjective meanings. The host country influenced the conceptualization of the immigrants: there were similarity between the Hungarian and Chinese immigrants' conceptualization in connection with several components (e.g. outcome orientation). Moreover, there were characteristics of conceptualization related directly to immigrant life (e.g. existential

insecurity). Regarding the characteristics of conceptualization, collectivistic features appeared more frequently in the immigrant sample than in the Hungarian and less frequently than in the Chinese samples. In terms of emotion and motivation, learning- and competition-related concepts show different tendencies. The learning-related terms were mostly unrelated to motivation and emotions excepting the concept of teacher that was characterized by positive emotions. These results suggest that the main role of school is related to social support but knowledge acquisition in cultural transition (e.g. Nguyen Luu et al., 2009). Regarding competition-related terms, Chinese immigrants were between the Hungarian and Chinese students. The effect of host culture was greater in relation to the competition-related concepts in contrast with the learning-related concepts. Cultural exposure had the greatest effect on the concept of losing: the subjective meaning of immigrants with greater length of residence was similar to that of the Hungarian sample, while the conceptualization of immigrants with shorter length of residence showed similarity to the Chinese sample. The effect of home country was the greatest in relation to effort; goal-oriented conceptualization was maintained even in cultural transition.

### **Study 3**

#### **Narratives of effort in the context of immigration: Comparison of Chinese, Hungarian and Chinese immigrant students**

Study 2 revealed important differences between Hungarian and Chinese samples related to the subjective meaning of effort. Effort is a basic motivational component and internal resource that highly contributes to effective coping (e.g. dealing with losing) and supports successful integration. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the concept more deeply and in an elaborated way. In Study 3, we investigated effort with narrative technique that makes possible to explore the concept on a deeper level.

#### ***Purpose***

The aim of the study was to reveal cultural scripts of effort in narratives among Chinese, Hungarian and Chinese immigrant students living in Hungary, moreover to investigate the effect of acculturation on the script.

#### ***Methods***

Altogether 139 students (49 Hungarian, 47 Chinese, 43 Chinese immigrants) aged 13-15 years participated in the study (mean age: 13.8).

The students were asked to provide narratives about past personal efforts (Mukaida et al., 2011). Content analyses were done on 222 narratives (76 Hungarian, 79 Chinese, 67 immigrants) using Atlas.ti 6.2. Analyses were made by two independent coders on 14 aspects (e.g. topic, types of goal, results, degree of elaboration, drive of effort, time-orientation,

emotion, actors, sayings, collectivistic tendencies). The coding categories were identified by the coders based on the actual narratives without using preset list.

## ***Results***

The results show that the Chinese narratives were goal- and achievement-oriented and highly elaborated with detailed strategies. Effort was dominantly related to learning and academic scene; moreover it was elicited typically by future goals (e.g. good grades) rather than negative outcome.

The Hungarian narratives were emotionally loaded, predominantly related to negative emotions. Goal pursuit was less elaborated, it mostly lacked concrete strategies. Additionally, effort was also related to relationships and coping (e.g. coping with death) to a great extent. Moreover, effort was typically made as a result of negative outcomes (e.g. exam failure, poor achievement) or negative emotional state (e.g. grief).

The narratives of the immigrants showed great similarity with the Chinese narratives. They were characterized by achievement and goal orientation, elaborated strategies, proactive nature and learning-focus. The effect of acculturation was less strong than in Study 2, and there were no differences among the immigrant subgroups based on the length of residency. Nevertheless, immigrants reported collectivistic tendencies less frequently than Chinese students did.

## **SUMMARY**

The main goal of the thesis was to reveal the cultural embeddedness of competition and learning in Hungarian and Chinese cultural contexts, and also to investigate the effect of immigration on conceptualization.

The results confirm previous studies which described the Hungarian approach as outcome-oriented and emotionally loaded (e.g. Csizér & Kormos, 2008; Szigeti Tóth, 2009; Fülöp, 2013), moreover the data support ineffective effort script in which effort does not lead to success (e.g. Szabó, 2012). Outcome is emphasized and valued without the elaboration of the process. Hungarian results can be attributed to individualism and independent self-construct (Owe, 2013), and to historical determinants (helplessness, pessimism, negativism maintained by unprocessed historical trauma - László & Fülöp, 2011).

The Chinese results reveal pragmatic and strategic approach in which goals and process are equally emphasized without emotional focus. In addition, effort contributes to results supporting effective script of effort (e.g. Li, 2012). Chinese results can be explained by Confucian philosophy and collectivism.

With regards to the Chinese immigrants the effect of acculturation was identified in both studies (Study 2 and Study 3). Immigrant conceptualization differed from the Chinese one on several aspects and showed similarity with the Hungarian conceptualization regarding more categories (e.g. outcome orientation) that might be attributed to the effect of host culture. The concepts were influenced by cultural exposure to various extent. The most sensitive concept was losing, whereas the less sensitive concept was effort. The result-oriented conceptualization of effort can be explained by the effect of both the host culture and the

immigrant status. Because cultural transition was rarely mentioned in the narratives, we argue that the adaptive conceptualization of effort is mostly fostered and conveyed by the host culture. Therefore, it seems that Chinese cultural script of effort is maintained even in cultural transition.

A robust result of the studies that collectivistic aspects appeared less frequently in the Chinese immigrant sample compared to the Chinese sample. The lower level of collectivism in the immigrant group can be attributed to the change of societal structure. In transition, the effect of political ideology of the home country (China) might decrease, and Chinese immigration seems to activate family-based resources, and reinforces value transfer useful for successful migration (e.g. effort orientation).

To summarize, it can be argued that Chinese culture has deeply rooted 'achievement-friendly' components (e.g. value of effort, effective effort script) that constitute stable and inevitable parts of the Chinese identity, and shape attitudes regardless of host country. Moreover there are components more sensitive to the changing context (e.g. outcome orientation). Furthermore immigrant status per se is able to influence conceptualization (e.g. insecurity). We conclude that conceptualization seems to be a dynamic process in cultural transition affected by host culture, home culture and immigrant status.

## **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The results contribute to the better understanding of the Hungarian characteristics in relation to learning and competition. Hungarian features (e.g. emotionally loaded conceptualization, especially negative emotions, intense outcome orientation, weak process orientation) are qualitatively different from that of Western and Eastern countries. The thesis draws attention to the limited and oversimplified nature of the traditional comparative studies, and encourages cross-cultural studies that expand East-West regions.

Further theoretical contribution of the thesis that it addressed a gap in the literature and investigated the effect of acculturation on conceptualization of learning and competition. Moreover, the research presented in the thesis included all actors involved in acculturation: home culture, host culture, and immigrant group. Most studies that investigated the effect of acculturation did not use a three-sample research design, and even the studies with three relevant samples concentrated typically on multicultural societies (USA, Canada) that are mostly regarded as destination countries for permanent residence (e.g. Chen & Stevenson, 1995). Our studies revealed the effect of acculturation in Hungary, a non-multicultural Central European society that is mostly regarded as a transit country for Chinese immigrants.

The findings also have significant practical implications. The results can be considered as useful feedback for the Hungarian education system in support of effective evidence-based strategies to increase competitiveness and successful coping. The results draw attention to the need of effective script of efforts and process orientation that might be underrated today in Hungary. The issue of effort is especially important and relevant because PISA results point to the slow percentage of resilient students (those who excel despite of disadvantaged background) in Hungary in contrast with the top-performing East Asian countries with high

percentage of resilient students (Csapó et al., 2014). Our findings might contribute to reveal extra factors behind the PISA results through the report of different scripts of effort, and provide useful information to develop strategies to increase the number of resilient students.

In addition, our results can support culturally sensitive pedagogy and psychology. The number of Chinese immigrant students in the Hungarian educational system are growing (Zatykó et al., 2013), it is important to know them better in order to promote effective intercultural pedagogy. Our studies revealed important internal resources (e.g. effort orientation) that can help Chinese immigrant children in cultural transition.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Due to the limitations of using non-representative samples, the results cannot be generalized to the whole Chinese and Hungarian population. Moreover, the subsample size of the Chinese immigrants based on the length of residency was low, therefore conclusions related to the effect of cultural exposure should be considered cautiously.

In the thesis we have only considered the length of residency as an acculturation index, thus future studies should take into consideration other factors like language knowledge, acculturation strategies, connection with the home and host culture, social network, aspiration, and identity.

Our results suggest that Chinese immigrant's script of envy serves as a protective resource in cultural adjustment. Although we did not investigate outcome factors, there is no data related to actual level of adaptation. Moreover, it is not known whether there is a correlation between different types of conceptualization and achievement. Further studies should investigate outcome factors such as grades, competition ranking and socio-cultural adaptation in relation to conceptualization.

Furthermore, the focus of the study was on Chinese immigrants in Hungary. In order to gain a better understanding of the distinctive effect of immigrant status, home and host country on conceptualization, future studies should investigate other host countries approached by Chinese immigrants (e.g. Spain, Netherlands, England, U.S.) and other ethnocultural groups living in Hungary (e.g. Vietnamese, Arabs, Turkish).

Moreover, in order to investigate the effect of immigration accurately, longitudinal studies should be carried out with the purpose of observing the change of conceptualization within the same person throughout cultural transition.

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### List of publications related to the thesis:

- Sebestyén N., Fülöp, M.** (2015). A versengés, győzelem és vesztes szubjektív jelentése magyar, kínai és Magyarországon tanuló kínai diákok körében. *Magyar Pszichológiai Szemle*, 70(1), 143-158.
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- Sebestyén, N.** (2013). Tanuláskoncepciók kulturális beágyazottsága: magyar, kínai és amerikai fiatal felnőttek tanulásfogalmának összevetése, *Magyar Pedagógia*, 113(1), 3-28.
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- Sebestyén, N., Fülöp M.** (2014). Versengés, győzelem és vesztes migrációs környezetben, *MTA Természettudományi Kutatóközpont Doktori Konferencia*, Budapest, Magyarország, pp. 76-77.
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- Sebestyén, N.** (2011). The Hungarian Learning Concept and its Relation to the American and Chinese One: Mapping Pragmatic, Mind, and Virtue Orientation. *IACCP Regional Conference*, June 30 - July 3, Istanbul, Turkey. p. 85.
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