



China's Image in Kazakhstan



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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Chapter 1. The Economic Agenda of China-Kazakhstan Relations.....	6
1.1. Joint Ventures in Kazakhstan	6
1.2. Chinese Presence in Kazakhstan's Agriculture	6
1.3 Co-operation in Transport	7
1.4. Kazakhstan's Economic Expectations	8
Chapter 2. Chinese Soft Power in Kazakhstan	9
2.1 Bilateral Agreements and International Student exchanges	9
2.2 Confucius Institutes and Chinese Think Tanks	11
2.3 Chinese Entertainment in Kazakhstan and Tourism.....	12
Chapter 3. Thorny Issues	13
3.1. "Re-education" Camps in Xinjiang	13
3.2. Environmental Issues.....	14
3.3. Extremism	16
Chapter 4. Assessment of China's Image in Kazakhstan	17
4.1 Limitations to Chinese Soft Power.....	18
4.2 A Battle of Perceptions.....	19
5. Closing Remarks	21

Abstract

In Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular, China has unleashed a charm offensive in order to promote its agenda. Image and soft power are two important and intertwined parameters in China's efforts to proceed with its objectives.

China's image and soft power in Kazakhstan are being exercised in the domains of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and economic cooperation. One could argue that, due to its rapid development in the past decades, China has obtained a considerable allure across the world by being a huge market and, after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, a significant source of investment capital. While BRI is an economic mega-project, it also serves as a useful tool for the promotion of a positive image of China. To a large extent, the BRI is not only about investing in infrastructure and facilitating connectivity for products and people; it is also meant to put forward Chinese values and to present an alternative "China model" of development.

Sitting along a key terrestrial BRI route, Kazakhstan seeks to attract Chinese investment and diversify its economy as well as increase its exports to China. People-to-people contacts also constitute a significant component of Beijing's strategy for the promotion of China's positive image in the country. Apart from the emphasis on historical ties between the Chinese and the Kazakhs, Beijing also uses scholarships, study tours and invitations for university faculty and students, while actively encouraging studies and research in China through a variety of programs. Also, six Confucius Institutes have been established in Kazakhstan.

At the same time, China's image in Kazakhstan presents a mixed picture, as there are several thorny issues alongside good news. For instance, the treatment of the Muslim population in Xinjiang (many of whom are ethnic Kazakhs) poses challenges to the positive messages that China pursues to send across the border. Territorial disputes between the two countries in the past also add to undercurrents of suspicion in Kazakhstan. Contrary to the high degree of acceptance of China among the Kazakh elite, the general public tends to have a negative attitude towards Chinese presence in Kazakhstan.

With regard to China's soft-power toolkit, it has not been particularly creative nor imaginative to date. Most sources indicate that western soft power appears to remain dominant in Kazakhstan at this stage. Yet, overall, China is projecting its image and soft power in Kazakhstan rather successfully, even if primarily at the level of political and economic elites and despite some "irritants" on the Sino-Kazakh agenda.

Introduction

Image is an important concept used by China in order to attain its goals in foreign policy. China's rise created the need for a narrative that would serve the country's objectives abroad, especially through what is known as "win-win cooperation" that has become the guiding philosophy for China's diplomacy.¹ It seems that China wishes to project an image of peacefulness as a regional leader that is dependable and economically efficient. China's efforts in public and cultural diplomacy are consistent with the promotion a positive image and with the practice of soft power. Image and soft power are two intertwined concepts, as the successful projection of a positive image can increase a country's soft power and vice versa.² As such, for the purposes of the current project, China's image in Kazakhstan will be examined through the prism of soft power.

Soft power, a state's ability to persuade another through attraction rather than coercion, is a concept in International Relations theory developed by Joseph Nye in 1990s.

*"...A state may achieve the outcome it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it or have agreed to a situation that produces such effects.[...] Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change."*³

Initially associated with the USA's post-WWII foreign policy, this concept is now being applied more broadly, and certainly befits a study of China's practice in promoting its image abroad. In terms of soft power, China typically employs a moderate political discourse on public and cultural diplomacy, trade and investment, as well as the promotion of the Chinese model of development. The idea of "*using virtue*" to influence is not a foreign concept to the Chinese culture, since, according to Confucianism, a state "*should set a good example to others*" and the philosopher Mencius has claimed that "*benevolent kings would have no rivals in the world and easily win the support of the people both domestically and overseas*". Nye's concept was introduced to Chinese academics very early and, in 1993, professor Wang Huning at Fudan University suggested that culture should be the main vehicle for Chinese soft power. In addition, the concept of soft power seems to be particularly appealing as an argument in favour of China's Peaceful Rise.

¹ Wang, Y. (2016) Build a New Type of International Relations Featuring Win-Win Cooperation, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*.
https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzb_663304/wjzbz_663308/2461_663310/t1376908.shtml.

² Huang, H. (2018) China's image in the Belt and Road Initiative: case study of Pakistan and India, *Lund University, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies*.
<http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=8960031&fileId=8960032>. p. 13-14.

³ Nye, J. (1990) Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), p. 166,168. www.jstor.org/stable/1148580.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is primarily known for its infrastructure investment projects and, at first glance, might seem irrelevant to the concept of soft power due to its economic nature. However, the BRI aligns with the Peaceful Rise discourse, and actually serves as a non-coercive and non-security (military) focused narrative which promotes China's soft power potential in Central Asia⁴. The BRI also serves as a promotion of China's image abroad; but while it is generally well-received across the world (apart from South Asia), its effectiveness is debatable⁵.

Central Asia has always been a strategically important part of China's neighbourhood. For the present research project, Kazakhstan has been chosen as a case study regarding the effectiveness and limitations of Chinese soft power in the region. The paper aims to examine: (i) ways in which China is exercising its soft power, (ii) narratives used for the promotion of its positive image, and (iii) its position when handling less "palatable" issues in its relations with Kazakhstan. In order to answer these questions, we will be looking at the economic agenda of China-Kazakhstan relations, such as trade, joint investment projects, socio-economic benefits and expectations. Secondly, we will refer to culture and education, as reflected in bilateral cultural agreements, the promotion of the Chinese language, the operation of Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan, the popularity of Chinese lifestyle and entertainment in the country, etc. The third chapter presents issues that pose a challenge to bilateral relations and China's image in Kazakhstan.

China has been particularly interested in Central Asia since the dissolution of the former USSR in 1991, with Beijing's main concern being the stability of the borders between the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the post-Soviet republics in the region. Xinjiang is an area of great importance to China, as it holds considerable energy reserves (approximately 30% on the country's reserves in oil, 40% in coal, 34% in natural gas and metals like copper and nickel), and benefits from its proximity for imports of oil and gas from Central Asia.⁶

Kazakhstan has a unique relationship with China, as it is one of the countries that share a border with Xinjiang and has been a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) since its inception in 1996. SCO has a strong focus on security related issues and the two partners share common priorities regarding the so-called "three evils": extremism, separatism and terrorism.⁷ In addition, Kazakhstan has signed a "Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation" with China (2002),⁸ as well as a large number of other bilateral agreements. Furthermore, Kazakhstan is an integral part of Beijing's flagship Belt and Road Initiative - notably, this mega-project was first unveiled by President Xi in Astana in September 2013.

⁴ Dadabaev, T. (2018) "Silk Road" as foreign policy discourse: The construction of Chinese, Japanese and Korean engagement strategies in Central Asia, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9: 30-41. p. 37.

⁵ Garcia Herrero, A. & Xu, J. (2019) Countries' Perceptions of China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Big Data Analysis, *Bruegel*. p. 1. <http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/WP-2019-01final.pdf>.

⁶ Indeo, F. (2015) China as Security Provider in Central Asia post 2014: A realistic perspective?. *Central Asia Security Policy Briefs*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs & OSCE Academy. p. 6-7. http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_17.pdf.

⁷ Ibid. p. 13.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2015) Joint Declaration on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Kazakhstan. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1293114.shtml.

Chapter 1. The Economic Agenda of China-Kazakhstan Relations

1.1. Joint Ventures in Kazakhstan

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Beijing has taken a lively interest in Kazakhstan's potential for economic growth. In trying to understand China's image in Kazakhstan, it is crucial to examine and analyse joint economic ventures, Chinese direct investment into budding sectors of Kazakhstan's economy and the expectations of this relationship on both sides.

The number of Chinese-Kazakh economic joint ventures has been steadily growing since the 1990s. While there were some 300 Chinese-Kazakh joint ventures in place in 1995, in 2007 there were no fewer than 4,000⁹. At the same time, the volume of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Kazakhstan has sharply increased over the past two decades. According to the National Bank of Kazakhstan, Chinese FDI in Kazakhstan accumulated to 500 million in 1999, but in 2008 alone it reached nearly \$700 million, and then increased to \$1.62 billion in 2011¹⁰. The past few years have seen a truly spectacular boom; by early 2018, there were 51 joint projects, whose total worth exceeded \$27 billion¹¹. The joint ventures between China and Kazakhstan are spread across various sectors, but primarily in hydrocarbons and agriculture. Investment in Kazakh oil is clearly driven by high demand in China, which is expected to consume 400 million tons of petroleum by 2020 and at least 60 % of that will have to be imported¹².

1.2. Chinese Presence in Kazakhstan's Agriculture

Some of the most sizeable investment projects by China in Kazakh agriculture include those worth \$1.2 billion in oilseed processing by Zhongfu Investment Group, \$200 million in beef, lamb and horsemeat by Rifa Investment, and \$80 million in the production of tomatoes and tomato paste by Cofco. Kazakhstan's agriculture, still marked by its Soviet legacy, remains largely inefficient and under-developed. Presumably, these investment projects contribute to the diversification and growth of Kazakhstan's economy, which still relies primarily on oil.¹³

Kazakhs have been particularly resistant to Chinese investment in the rural countryside, especially in eastern Kazakhstan near the Chinese border. There have even been cases where Kazakh authorities have had to back out on deals with Chinese

⁹ Peyrouse, S. (2008) Chinese Economic Presence in Kazakhstan. *China Perspectives*. p. 34–49.
<http://journals.openedition.org/chin perspectives/4053>.

¹⁰ O'Neill, D. C. (2014) Risky business: The political economy of Chinese investment in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. p. 145–156.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262384749_Risky_business_The_political_economy_of_Chinese_investment_in_Kazakhstan.

¹¹ Anon. (2018) Kazakh-Chinese industrial projects exceed \$27 billion, *Agencia EFE*. 14th February.
<https://www.efe.com/efe/english/business/kazakh-chinese-industrial-projects-exceed-27-billion/50000265-3523943#>.

¹² Peyrouse, S. (2008) Chinese Economic Presence in Kazakhstan. *China Perspectives*. p. 34–49.
<http://journals.openedition.org/chin perspectives/4053>.

¹³ Farchy, J. (2016) China plans to invest \$1.9bn in Kazakh agriculture. *Financial Times*. 4th May.
<https://www.ft.com/content/9c84a0f4-15d3-11e6-9d98-00386a18e39d>.

investors because of protests by local people. Moreover, a government decision in 2016 to promulgate a bill allowing foreigners to rent agricultural land for up to 25 years was perceived as a threat by many Kazakhs and caused unrest. Local people fear that, if Chinese investors acquire land, several decades down the road Kazakhs will become slaves to Chinese landowners.¹⁴

1.3 Co-operation in Transport

Port Khorgos: An Essential Piece of the New Silk Economic Belt



Source: South China Morning Post

The border city of Khorgos has become the epitome of the Chinese and Kazakh economic partnership. This "dry port" is already the largest of its kind across the globe and a significant hub for transport and commerce. Thanks to large-scale Chinese investment, it is becoming China's most important piece in terms of links to Russia and Europe. By 2017, Khorgos had been connected to 27 cities in China and 11 major cities in Europe.¹⁵ According to Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ), the national railway company, the total transit China-Europe-China container flow amounted to 104,600 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU) in 2016. It then nearly doubled in 2017 to 201,000 TEU and was projected to account to 340,000 TEU by the end of 2018. There is a prediction of the 2020 fiscal year resulting in 800,000 TEU. By 2020, Kazakhstan expects an increase of transit freight revenue, with the goal set at \$5 billion.¹⁶

This port is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and also part of their growing partnership with Kazakhstan in joint economic ventures. At the Belt and Road Summit held in Beijing, on 15 May 2017, China's COSCO Shipping and the Port of Lianyungang signed on to take a 49% share of Khorgos. Chinese investment in Port Khorgos allows for new opportunities in regards to Chinese exports.

¹⁴Abdurasulov, A. (2016) Kazakhstan's land reform protests explained. *BBC*. 28th April. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36163103>.

¹⁵Shepard, W. (2017) New Silk Road: China Takes A 49% Cut of Khorgos Gateway, A Major Overland Silk Road Port. *Forbes*. 26th May. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/05/26/new-silk-road-china-takes-a-49-cut-of-khorgos-gateway-a-major-overland-silk-road-port/>.

¹⁶ Anon. (2018) Belt and Road Updates 2018, *Samruk Kazyna*. p. 3-8. <https://www.sk.kz/upload/iblock/898/8982ade4e1075b33189e5044b01ff98e.pdf>.

While Port Khorgos is a relatively recent project, it is not showing any sign of slowing down. Chinese investments in developing the infrastructure of Port Khorgos is planned to be considerably upgraded in the future. The joint venture of developing Port Khorgos into a critically important dry port along the New Silk Road began in 2014, and since the beginning, the growth has been exponential. As China's export economy becomes dependent on the efficiency of Port Khorgos, the more China wants to be involved with the management of the port. China's investment in Port Khorgos shows Beijing's commitment to strengthen its economic partnership with Kazakhstan, and also utilize the facilities in question them as a means of exporting Chinese goods to the West by train.

1.4. Kazakhstan's Economic Expectations

The increasing volume of Chinese FDI in Kazakhstan is a steady feature of the bilateral relations. In 2018, the Kazakh Minister for Investment and Development Zhenis Kasymbek, announced six new Kazakh-Chinese projects worth \$363 million. It should be noted that Kazakhstan seems to view economic cooperation with China as an opportunity to promote its own brand as FDI recipient ¹⁷. Samruk-Kazyna, the Sovereign Wealth Fund of Kazakhstan, estimates possible spillover effects from Chinese presence and the BRI as follows: \$7 billion of estimated infrastructure investment, 4.5%-7.0% contribution to domestic GDP growth and over 200,000 jobs created by 2021¹⁸. Kazakhs see China as a major source of investment capital and a market for their products. During 2017, exports to China amounted for \$5.78 billion. With a GDP of \$159.41 billion, exports to China accounted for roughly 3.62% of Kazakhstan's GDP in the same year ¹⁹.

"Possible spillover effects from the Chinese presence and the BRI are estimated at a 4.5%-7.0% contribution to domestic GDP growth and over 200,000 jobs created by 2021."

The Kazakh government hopes that related socio-economic benefits drawn from cooperation with China will help reduce social tension in the country. The 50-odd Sino-Kazakh joint ventures are expected to generate some 20,000 jobs.²⁰ Expectations are particularly high in relation to agriculture, as almost half the Kazakh population (49.6%) lives in rural areas, which also accounts for the highest proportion of unemployment in the country.²¹

¹⁷ Anon. (2018) Kazakh-Chinese industrial projects exceed \$27 billion, *Agencia EFE*. 14th February. <https://www.efc.com/efe/english/business/kazakh-chinese-industrial-projects-exceed-27-billion/50000265-3523943#>.

¹⁸ Anon. (2018) Belt and Road Updates 2018, *Samruk Kazyna*. p. 10. <https://www.sk.kz/upload/iblock/898/8982ade4e1075b33189e5044b01ff98e.pdf>

¹⁹ Anon. (2017) Kazakhstan Exports to China, *Trading Economics*. <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/exports/china>.

²⁰ Mamrayymov, T. (2017) Kazakhstan i Kitay: Ozhidaniya i strahi (Kazakhstan and China: Expectations and Fears), *Kontur*, 28th November. <http://www.kontur.kz/node/3296>.

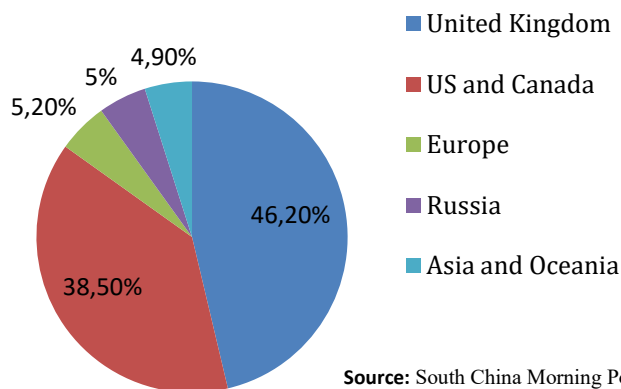
²¹ Laruelle, M. (edit.) (2018) China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia, *George Washington University, Central Asia Program*. p. 101, 103-104. https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf.

Chapter 2. Chinese Soft Power in Kazakhstan

Soft power resources relate to a country's culture, political values and foreign policy. China regards culture as the most important source of soft power and has placed emphasis on cultural promotion.

2.1 Bilateral Agreements and International Student exchanges

Graph 1. Bolashak Scholarship recipients studying abroad



With regard to people-to-people exchanges between China and Kazakhstan, at least 230 contracts and agreements in different areas have been signed to date. For example, in August, 2015, during an official visit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev to China, a bilateral agreement on cultural and humanitarian cooperation was signed. The two countries have also promoted enhanced technological, cultural, media, youth exchanges, and a "Year of Tourism" in Kazakhstan was held by China in 2017²².

There are agreements on mutual recognition of diplomas in high education between the countries²³. In 2016, 6.2% of the total flow of international students to China in 2016 came from Kazakhstan with the aim to stay for more than six months. Notably, most Kazakh nationals studying in China receive scholarships from Beijing²⁴.

In 2015 there were 897 exchange students from China studying in Kazakhstan²⁵ and 14,000 students from Kazakhstan studying in China²⁶.

²² Anon. (2017) 2017 Year of China Tourism opens in Almaty, *Kazinform International News Agency*. 19th April. https://www.inform.kz/en/2017-year-of-china-tourism-in-kazakhstan-opens-in-almaty_a3018627.

²³ Anon. (2016) Cultural and Humanitarian Cooperation, *Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the People's Republic of China*, <http://www.mfa.gov.kz/en/beijing/content-view/kulturno-gumanitarnoe-sotrudnicestvo>.

²⁴ Le Corre, P. (2018) Kazakhstan must look beyond the Belt and Road, *Nikkei Asian Review*. 4th May. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Kazakhstan-must-look-beyond-the-Belt-and-Road2>.

²⁵ Anon. (2017) Reviews of National Policies for Education: Higher Education in Kazakhstan 2017, *OECD*. 15th March. <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/9789264268531-8-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/9789264268531-8-en>.

²⁶ Anon. (2016) Outbound mobility from Kazakhstan up 140% over past decade, *ICEF Monitor*. 12th December. <http://monitor.icef.com/2016/12/outbound-mobility-kazakhstan-140-past-decade/>.

Importantly, between 1994 and 2017 the Kazakh government has awarded 12,831 Bolashak International scholarships to students.²⁷ At present, 1,209 scholarship holders are studying abroad; 14 are in bachelor programmes, 1,021 are master's degree students, 118 are engaged in doctoral studies, two are undergoing post-graduate courses and 54 are interns. Of the total, 46.2% are studying in United Kingdom universities, 38.5% in the U.S. and Canada, 5.2% in continental Europe, 4.9% in Asia and Oceania, and 5% in Russia.²⁸ Obviously, the vast majority of Kazakh students sponsored by their government are sent to western universities – in turn, China's share seems to be hidden in the meagre 4.9% for Asia and Oceania.

Reportedly, Kazakh students seek education in China because the Chinese universities are cheaper and of better quality²⁹. China has launched joint research projects with Chinese universities and research institutions, and has established a research center for China studies. Nazarbayev University has already held consultations with several Chinese universities, such as Beijing University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, and Beijing Normal University. The Chinese Embassy to Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan Diplomatic Service have jointly initiated a service called "Quick Chinese" in order to help Kazakh people learn Chinese, and promote academic exchanges between Chinese and Kazakh universities.

The visa regime between two countries is also an indicator of the bilateral relations. The mutual visa regime between China and Kazakhstan, has been criticized in both countries due to difficulties in the visa application process (long queues at the consulates, poor and uncomfortable waiting facilities, extended processing time for visa applications, complicated bureaucratic procedures).³⁰ The governments of Kazakhstan and China have held several rounds of negotiations around removing, or at least facilitating, the visa regime, beginning with group travels for tourist purposes; however, the very prospect of lifting visa requirements for Chinese citizens when entering Kazakhstan was met with concerns.³¹

²⁷ Anon. (n.d.) *About "Bolashak"*. JSC Center for international programs. <https://bolashak.gov.kz/en>.

²⁸ Omirgazy, D. (2018) Kazakhstan's Bolashak Programme has awarded 12,831 scholarships in 25 years, *Astana Times*. 27th April. <https://astanatimes.com/2018/04/kazakhstans-bolashak-programme-has-awarded-12831-scholarships-in-25-years/>.

²⁹ Prokopenko, V. & Urazova, D. (2014) Chinese migration to Kazakhstan-threat or myth?, *Tengrinews*. https://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Chinese-migration-to-Kazakhstan-threat-or-myth-256372/.

³⁰ Dillon, M. (2016), *Chinese Minorities at home and abroad*, Abingdon: Routledge.

³¹ Burkhanov, A. & Chen, Y. (2016), Kazakh perspective on China, the Chinese, and Chinese migration, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39(12). Routledge.

2.2 Confucius Institutes and Chinese Think Tanks

The evolution and change of Chinese public diplomacy can be seen from the Confucius Institutes, Chinese mass media's "going out" strategy as well as various international events, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. In this context, it is really important to understand the background to Chinese cultural expansion. As Kazakhstan is viewed as China's key strategic and economic partner in the Central Asian region and an important actor in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it attracts a lot of attention in Chinese academic circles. Many Chinese specialized think tanks focus on analyzing the domestic political situation, problems linked to the presidential succession of Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as issues relating to terrorism, extremism and separatism. Chinese research centres, primarily institutions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), hold a large number of annual seminars, summer schools, conferences, symposiums. Heads of Kazakhstani research institutes, representatives of NGOs, journalists and university staff are often invited in order to assess the political and economic spectrum of Kazakhstan³².

Three think tanks clearly stand out due to their activities and influence: the Chunqiu Research Institute, the Center for China and Globalization Studies, and the Chongyang Institute of Financial Studies at Renmin University³³.

Another way for China to project its soft power is through Confucius Institutes (CIs), whose number has been growing since 2006. CIs are non-profit public institutions that aim to promote the Chinese language and culture abroad. Chinese partners provide funding, teaching staff and materials, while universities of the host country offer accommodation, infrastructure and administrative support. As stated in their by-laws, CIs serve to build a "harmonious world" and promote "multiculturalism", which is in line with the current foreign policy of China. Notably however, political goals are not explicitly mentioned in the mission of CIs.

"Another way for China to project its soft power is through Confucius Institutes (CIs), whose number has been growing since 2006."

The Nikkei Asian Review indicates that in 2018 there were six Confucius Institutes operating in Kazakhstan³⁴. There are about 2,000 students studying at the Confucius Institutes in Kazakhstan every year.³⁵ It is important to note that Confucius Institutes directors encourage the students with academic excellence to continue their studies in China. *"Directors at CIs hope that more local people can learn the Chinese language*

³² Anon. (n.d.) A Brief Assessment of China's Think Tank World, *International Turcic Academy*.
http://twesco.org/en/about/publications/kitayskie_mozgovye_tsentry_i_tsentrlnaya_aziya_novaya_otsenka/.

³³ Dingding, C. (2015), The rise of China's New Soft Power, *The Diplomat*. 9th June.
<https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/the-rise-of-chinas-new-soft-power/>.

³⁴ Le Corre, P. (2018) Kazakhstan must look beyond the Belt and Road, *Nikkei Asian Review*. 4th May.
<https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Kazakhstan-must-look-beyond-the-Belt-and-Road2>.

³⁵ Ibid.

and become familiar with China in order to facilitate various engagements with the country." ³⁶

2.3 Chinese Entertainment in Kazakhstan and Tourism

Another increasingly prominent aspect of Sino-Kazakh cooperation to entertainment and popular culture. Thus, in 2017, China signed a co-production agreement with Kazakhstan on a joint project for a film titled "Composer" with the goal of promoting more bilateral ties. Also in 2017, a Chinese Film Festival was organized in Astana, in an effort to help Kazakh people better understand traditional Chinese culture and see contemporary China as a multi-ethnic country with its cultural variety. The Chinese goal was once again, to help Kazakh people familiarise themselves with the Belt and Road Initiative, and win their hearts and minds for a mega-project that generally serves the promotion of top-down government policies. Due to the imposition of taxes to all entertainment firms, film companies are looking for tax havens such as Khorgos, which is unlikely to have ever seen many real film producers or stars. ³⁷

In terms of tourism, the number of Chinese visitors to Kazakhstan reached 257,000 people in 2017, while the overall volume of tourist flows between the two countries reached half a million people that year. In the National Museum of Kazakhstan, one of the landmark buildings in Kazakh capital Astana, many exhibits excavated along the ancient Silk Road aim to present the history of China-Kazakhstan friendship. This aspect, is strictly related to the people-to-people bond strategy, that tends to project China as a friendly partner to the rest of the world. ³⁸

³⁶ Xueyu, Z. (2018) 5th Anniversary of Belt and Road Initiative: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Center Promote People-to-people Bond along "Belt and Road", *Hanban News*. 5th September. http://english.hanban.org/article/2018-09/05/content_743311.htm.

³⁷ Shackleton, L. (2018) Why turbulent times may be ahead for China's film industry, *Screendaily*. 1st November. <https://www.screendaily.com/features/why-turbulent-times-may-be-ahead-for-chinas-film-industry/5134186.article>.

³⁸ Xiaoning, M., Hanbo, Z., Yahong, X. & Junguo, L. (2017) Stories of China- Kazakhstan friendly exchange a "rich mine", *People's Daily*. 7th June. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0607/c90000-9225422.html>.

Chapter 3. Thorny Issues

3.1. "Re-education" Camps in Xinjiang

The operation of "re-education camps" in Xinjiang since 2014, has been a source of tension between the two countries. According to a United Nation's human rights panel, it is estimated that approximately 1 million ethnic Uyghurs were imprisoned in China.³⁹ The Chinese government denies these accusations. Furthermore, Beijing has launched the campaign "Tell China's story well"- a program that aims to improve China's image on the international stage- as a part of an active foreign policy. The term "sovereignty" is often used not only to condemn separatists' movements but also to help Beijing gain other countries' support towards China's policy in Taiwan and Xinjiang⁴⁰.

In China's narrative, those people are influenced by religious extremism and the "re-education camps" are guarantees of security, stability and prosperity in the region⁴¹. Thus, the fear of extremism is the main argument in favour of Beijing's policy in Xinjiang. It is worth mentioning that the term "development" in Beijing's public diplomacy is linked with the distorted image of human rights in China. The people's common right to development is mostly targeted to emerging markets and economic prosperity and thus it serves as a justification of the lack of civil and political rights in China⁴².

It is estimated that around 1.2 million ethnic Kazakhs live in Xinjiang. According to Radio Free Asia, approximately 3.000 Kazakhs are detained by Chinese authorities in Xinjiang per week⁴³. Because of Xinjiang's industrialisation, many Han Chinese migrate to the region and get better jobs and salaries than local Muslims creating sentiment of resentment among them⁴⁴. Because of the mistreatment of Muslim minorities, an issue that is discussed widely, anti-Chinese sentiments have increased among Kazakh people⁴⁵.

Apparently, there have been issues with ethnic Kazakhs in Xinjiang long before the current drive of Chinese authorities in Xinjiang. Notably, the vast majority of people

³⁹ Nebehay, S. (2018) West calls on China to close Uighur detention camps, *Reuters*. 6th November. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-rights-un/west-calls-on-china-to-close-uighur-detention-camps-idUSKCN1NB1CF>.

⁴⁰ Szczudlik, J. (2018) Tell China's Stories Well: Implications for the Western Narrative, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*. 17th September. <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-169#>.

⁴¹ Kuo, L. (2018) China denies violating minority rights amid detention claims, *The Guardian*, 13th August 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/13/china-state-media-defend-intense-controls-xinjiang-uyghurs>.

⁴² Szczudlik, J. (2018) Tell China's Stories Well: Implications for the Western Narrative, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*. 17th September. <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-169#>.

⁴³ Long, Q. (2017) China's Mass Detention of Xinjiang's Ethnic Minorities Shows No Sign of Let-up, *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*. 1st November. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/detention-11012017120255.html>.

⁴⁴ Dillon, M. (2009) Uighur resentment at Beijing's rule, *BBC News*. 6th July. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8137206.stm>.

⁴⁵ Fernandez, E. (2018) Chinese handling of Kazakhs a bump in Belt and Road, *South China Morning Post*. 4th August. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2158028/chinese-handling-kazakhs-bump-belt-and-road>.

(96.8%), who have migrated to Kazakhstan from China between 1995 to 2012, are ethnic Kazakhs.⁴⁶

Graph 2. Immigration from China to Kazakhstan, January 1995 - October 2012 (Ethnic Kazakhs in red)

Source: Tengrinewz.kz



3.2. Environmental Issues

A major problem in Sino-Kazakh relations is the environmental damage, which is related to inefficient transboundary water management. The two biggest rivers of Kazakhstan, Ili and Irtysh which cross the Sino-Kazakh borders, suffer from growing drought and contamination. The main reason for this, is China's "Project 635", an initiative for the development of Xinjiang, through mass industrialisation of XUAR. A big part of Xinjiang's territory are deserts or semi-deserts and that makes water the most valuable resource for the region's development⁴⁷. The Ili River is the main tributary of Balkhash Lake, a vital factor in Kazakhstan's economy (rich fisheries, irrigation, livestock production, etc.). Due to Xinjiang's industrialisation, China's water usage may cause break of the lake into smaller pieces in the future, according to scientists. The above mentioned issues affect directly approximately 7 million

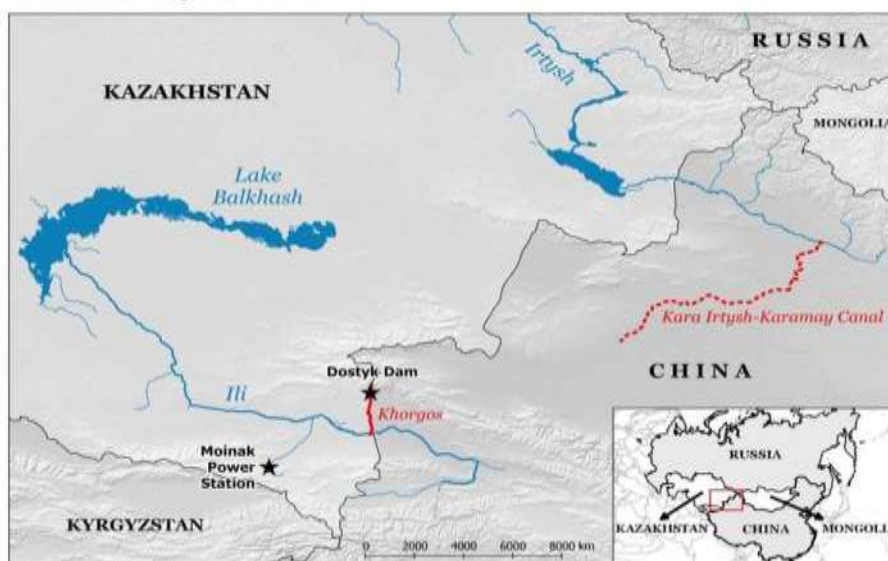
⁴⁶ Zhumaly, R. (2014) Kitayskaya migratsiya v Kazakhstan mozhet usilit'sya cherez 10 let (Chinese migration to Kazakhstan may grow 10 years down the road), *Tengrinews*, 23rd September. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/kitayskaya-migratsiya-kazakhstan-usilitsya-10-let-ekspert-262236/.

⁴⁷ Baizokova, Z. (2015) The Irtysh and Ili Transboundary Rivers: The Kazakh-Chinese Path To Compromise, *Voices from Central Asia, Central Asia Program*. 3rd January. <http://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/7374>.

Kazakhs, who depend on those two rivers and 18 smaller ones that cross the borders of two countries⁴⁸.

On a bilateral level, China and Kazakhstan have signed eight agreements on the rational use and management of transboundary water. The most important of them is the "China-Kazakhstan Agreement Concerning Cooperation in the Use and Protection of Transboundary Rivers" in 2001, which constitutes the base for the dialogue and cooperation between the two countries and provides the establishment of a Joint River Commission. The last joint initiative were the consultations on a draft of the Agreement on Water Distribution of Cross-Border Rivers in 2015⁴⁹. However, little progress has been made to date⁵⁰.

The Ili and Irtysh rivers



Source: ChinaWater Risk.

On the other hand, environmental issues are part of the Chinese narrative. According to 13th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (2016-2020), Beijing aims to promote an environmental friendly policy, especially on agriculture and infrastructure sector, including "green cities". The environmental consequences of Chinese water usage and Xinjiang's industrialisation seem to affect Chinese image in Kazakhstan. According to a public opinion survey, with 234 Kazakh participants, approximately 70% of participants considered environmental damage as a risk in case Chinese investment increases⁵¹. It seems that Chinese authorities turn a blind eye to environmental standards and

⁴⁸ Stone, R. (2012), Transboundary Rivers: For China and Kazakhstan, No Meeting of the Minds on Water, *Science*, Vol. 337. <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/337/6093/405>.

⁴⁹ Ho, S. (2017) China's transboundary river policies towards Kazakhstan: issue-linkages and incentives for cooperation, *Water International*, 42:2, p. 142-162. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02508060.2017.1272233>.

⁵⁰ Stone, R. (2012) Transboundary Rivers: For China and Kazakhstan, No Meeting of the Minds on Water, *Science*, Vol. 337. <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/337/6093/405>.

⁵¹ Laruelle, M. (edit.) (2018) China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia, *George Washington University, Central Asia Program*. p.g.74-75. https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf.

consider them less important than economic benefits drawn for Xinjiang. According to the Chinese side, these environmental problems are "*greatly exaggerated and inflated in other countries*". The issue of transboundary rivers in the Chinese media is barely even addressed still.⁵²

"Intrusive policing may be effective in controlling Xinjiang, but also affects China's image in Kazakhstan negatively."

3.3. Extremism

An issue that is strongly linked with the re-education camps is extremism and violent terrorism. Since 9/11 terrorist attack and the "war on terror" led by the U.S, Uyghurs in Kazakhstan have been viewed with suspicion from Kazakh authorities. China has had similar concerns, because of the large Muslim community living in Xinjiang⁵³.

Extremism is part of the "Three Evils" (terrorism, separatism and extremism), which threaten China's stability and prosperity⁵⁴. It is thus considered an important issue on Beijing's agenda. In Chinese public diplomacy, terrorism is linked to separatism, which refers mostly to the Uyghurs⁵⁵. In December 2015, China's first comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Law was passed. According to that, the government stipulated the duty for both organizations and individuals to collaborate with the government in order to cope with extremism and terrorism. Generally, it was considered as a strict law and was accused by the western media for the violation of human rights⁵⁶.

Extreme measures for closely monitoring those suspicious of terrorism have been implemented, such as CCTV cameras, mobile Internet technologies, big data analytics and the establishment of "Convenience Police Stations" that has created a rapid rise in security recruitment⁵⁷. This state of intrusive policing may be effective in controlling the area, but also affects China's image in Kazakhstan negatively. China is becoming less attractive among Kazakh citizens and the anti-Chinese sentiment continues to be on rise.

⁵² Valeev, R. M., Kadyrova, L. I. & Alikberova, A. R. (2017) The problem of transboundary water resources in China-Kazakhstan relations, *European Research Studies Journal*, Volume XX, Special Issue. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/34864/The_Problem_of_Transboundary_Water_Resources_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁵³ Laruelle, M. (edit.) (2018) China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia, *George Washington University, Central Asia Program*. p. 156. https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf.

⁵⁴ Lei, Z. (2017) Xi vows to fight "three evil forces" of terrorism, separatism and extremism, *The Telegraph*. 19th June. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world/china-watch/politics/xi-fights-three-evil-forces-terrorism-separatism-extremism/>.

⁵⁵ Szczudlik, J. (2018) Tell China's Stories Well: Implications for the Western Narrative, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*. 17th September. <http://www.pism.pl/Publications/PISM-Policy-Paper-no-169#>.

⁵⁶ Zhou, Z. (2016) China's Comprehensive Counter-Terrorism Law, *The Diplomat*. 23rd January. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/chinas-comprehensive-counter-terrorism-law/>.

⁵⁷ Zenz, A. & Leipold, J. (2017) Xinjiang's Rapidly Evolving Security State, *China Brief*. 14th March. <https://jamestown.org/program/xinjiangs-rapidly-evolving-security-state/>.

Chapter 4. Assessment of China's Image in Kazakhstan

As mentioned in previous chapters, when it comes to the exercise of Soft Power in Kazakhstan, China employs her typical toolkit of cultural diplomacy, trade and investment, as well as the promotion of the Chinese model of development in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Kazakhstan has long been of interest to Beijing for economic and geopolitical reasons and with the launch of BRI, Chinese FDI has shown a sharp increase, especially in the sectors of infrastructure, hydrocarbons and agriculture. The promotion of People-to-People contacts also represent Beijing's strategy for the promotion of China's culture and positive image. However, issues like the treatment of the Muslim community in Xinjiang, the environmental damage, the problematic transboundary water management along with negative perceptions of Chinese, pose obstacles to Beijing's promotion of a positive image.

To a certain extent, Chinese soft power in Kazakhstan is effective and fares positively in terms of its image; especially within the context of economic cooperation. Taking into account the Kazakh expectations from future investment, it is clear that China is viewed as a major opportunity for economic growth. During the last decades, China has made various efforts to bridge the gap between Chinese representatives and local stakeholders. Taking under consideration the fact that Kazakhs have reacted negatively to high-level governmental decisions relating to land reforms, China has been trying to come up with ways to approach the Kazakh people in order to ameliorate its image. Such ways are cultural exchanges such as the "Year of Tourism" and the Film Festival have been held by China to Kazakhstan and they were perceived quite positively by the local population, especially since the exposure to tourism has helped local businesses to grow.

Yet another element working in favour of China's image is the fact that its form of governance is not very different from Kazakhstan's. Both countries have what is effectively a one-party rule, with the Communist Party of China and the Nur Otan party in Kazakhstan. President Xi's unlimited number of terms of office are fully in line with Nursultan Nazabayev's for-life presidency ever since the emergency of Kazakhstan as an independent state. China's political stability may well contribute to its popularity with Kazakh elites.

It should be noted that there is a clear divide between the pro-China mood of political and economic elites⁵⁸ and a pronounced sinophobic sentiment among citizens. At the same time, this divide is not unique to Kazakhstan, therefore this should not come as a surprise. A gap between the attitudes of political and economic elites on the one hand, and society on the other hand has been recorded in a number of European countries⁵⁹. It appears that Chinese image and soft power is more effective on a governmental level, whilst it has failed to strike a chord with the general public. Kazakh people

⁵⁸ Karim Massimov, a Chinese-speaking former prime minister of Kazakhstan, studied in Beijing and Wuhan from 1988 to 1991. He served twice as prime minister between January 2007 and September 2016, and is seen as a staunch supporter of Kazakh-Chinese ties.

⁵⁹ Tonchev, P. (edit.), (2018) China's Image in Greece, 2008-2018, *Institute of International Economic Relations*. p. 17. http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece_9-10-2018.pdf.

remain sceptical towards the Chinese and, as a result, it will not be easy for China to influence their mindset and cultural habits.

4.1 Limitations to Chinese Soft Power

According to a school of thought in Kazakhstan, China's soft-power toolkit has not been particularly creative nor imaginative to date. While China's public diplomacy focuses primarily on economic projects and instruments, a lack of transparency in the Chinese way of doing business breeds suspicion. Chinese content in the entertainment industry is not adapted to Kazakhstan's national traditions and peculiarities. The six Confucius Institutes currently operational in the country are not particularly popular. Education in China is popular with young Kazakhs mostly because it is considered affordable. The use of "scientific diplomacy" appeals to both students and researchers in Kazakhstan, but not least thanks to numerous grants and scholarships provided by China.

The Chinese seem to pursue their goals in Kazakhstan by trying to downgrade the importance of issues of tension. The operation of the "re-education" camps in Xinjiang is generally embellished by the Chinese side, denying all the accusations related to the violation of human rights. Instead, they speak of vocational and educational centres where the Muslim extremists are able to *"see clearly the essence and harm of terrorism"*⁶⁰. Regarding environmental issues, it seems that they are avoided by the Chinese media and officials and also there is no intention by the Chinese side of this problem to be solved in a multilateral level⁶¹. It is true that in the 13th five year plan, there are many references in the ecological development of China. However, it is uncertain how an eco-friendly agenda can be implemented combined to the mass industrialisation of Xinjiang. When it comes to extremism, the Chinese narrative is quite clear. They strongly condemn it, and it is part of their everyday agenda. As mentioned above, the terms of terrorism and separatism are linked to extremism as part of the "three evils" and have great importance in Chinese public.

"China's soft-power toolkit has not been particularly creative nor imaginative to date."

The fear of Chinese migration is one of the most important issues that affect China's image. According to a survey, in 2012 "positive" and "very positive" attitudes to Chinese migrants dropped to 23% (from 26% in 2007), while the share of "negative" and "very negative" attitudes increased to 33% (from 18% in 2007)⁶². In general, the political and economic elites in Kazakhstan have a positive perception about Chinese presence. At the same time, there is a division; while many people benefit from

⁶⁰ Anon. (2018) Xinjiang official defends "education centres" for Uighur Muslims, *BBC News*. 16th October. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-45872356>.

⁶¹ Valeev, R. M., Kadyrova, L. I. & Alikberova, A. R. (2017) The problem of transboundary water resources in China-Kazakhstan relations, *European Research Studies Journal*, Volume XX, Special Issue. https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/handle/123456789/34864/The_Problem_of_Transboundary_Water_Resources_2017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁶² Laruelle, M. (edit.) (2018) China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia, *George Washington University, Central Asia Program*. p. 148-149. https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf.

Chinese economic presence in the country, a number of businessmen in Kazakhstan fear Chinese competition⁶³.

With the growth of Chinese investments in joint ventures with Kazakhstan, the division and disconnect between the elites and general public also begins to become more visible.

4.2 A Battle of Perceptions

Obstacles to Chinese soft power in Kazakhstan are strongly linked to the Xinjiang region. The image that China wants to project abroad is that of a reliable economic partner that has no political expectations and aspirations⁶⁴. According to Chinese officials, Beijing wants to ensure stability in Xinjiang by its economic development that will provide more job opportunities and will deepen the ties between Muslims and Han Chinese. As the Chinese presence in Kazakhstan increases, so do incidences of violence and conspiracy theories that China tries to "take over Central Asia"⁶⁵. A growing sinophobia about China's economic presence in Kazakhstan is perceptible.

According to Kazakh newspapers there is a prominent sinophobic sentiment among Kazakh people. More precisely, although China is viewed as a positive factor concerning geopolitical issues, there is scepticism in relation to cultural and identity issues. While the Kazakh government is trying to form a pro-Chinese discourse, there is a clear sense of criticism towards China by private Kazakh and Russian media outlets in comparison to the state-funded ones. Besides, there is a persistent fear that a sparsely populated Kazakhstan will be taken over by the huge Chinese population and that Chinese investors will become owners of Kazakh land. As for Russian scepticism, it is not assuaged by the fact that the Kazakh government has been Moscow considering to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin.⁶⁶

Kazakhs are apprehensive of China's growing power and influence in the country. Local people fear that decision-making will increasingly be in the hands of Chinese businessmen. With their heavy investments, they are hoping for large profits in businesses led by Kazakhs. In agriculture, where the Chinese believe the investments will prosper, they need to instruct the Kazakhs on how to manage their operations. The Chinese monitoring their investments can make the Kazakhs feel as if they are working for them. This underlying Chinese influence behind their investments in budding Kazakh industries fuels the fire of the anti-Chinese sentiment amongst much of the working class in Kazakhstan. With the Kazakh government issuing over 12,500 work permits to Chinese specialists to date, Kazakhs have a valid concern regarding the influence exerted through large Chinese investments. At the same time, Chinese migrants rarely obtain Kazakhstan's citizenship. Nor do they enter into mixed

⁶³ Peyrouse, S. (2016) Discussing China: Sinophilia and sinophobia in Central Asia, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*. 7(1). p.14-13. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366515000251>.

⁶⁴ Toleukhanova, A. (2016) Kazakhstan & China: Fear, Loathing and Money, *Eurasianet*. 21st June. <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-china-fear-loathing-and-money>.

⁶⁵ Owen, C. (2016) Chinese Expansion in Central Asia: Problems and Perspectives, *The Foreign Policy Centre*. 14th July. <https://fpc.org.uk/chinese-expansion-in-central-asia-problems-and-perspectives/>.

⁶⁶ Dingding, C. (2015), The rise of China's New Soft Power, *The Diplomat*. 9th June. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/the-rise-of-chinas-new-soft-power/>.

"Chinese soft power seems effective on a political and economic level, but less so with a view to society."

marriages with Kazakhs. Only 74 marriages between ethnic Chinese and Kazakhs were recorded from 1995 to 2012.⁶⁷

The launch of the China-Kazakhstan Railway and China-Kazakhstan International Border Cooperation Center at Khorgos in December 2011 created some fears among Kazakh people that Chinese migrants would take jobs away from locals. This is attributed to the impression that the large-scale construction projects for the development of the region are heavily based on Chinese labourers who come to Kazakhstan on work visas⁶⁸.

Despite the pro-Chinese mood within Kazakhstan's political elite, the general public does not appear equally enamoured. The Uygur issue, alongside a generalised apprehension of a Chinese take-over have fed a sinophobic sentiment across the population. However, it is not unlikely that this sentiment is related to pre-existing perceptions and is not directly linked to what could be viewed as a threat (e.g. loss of jobs for local staff due to the transfer of Chinese factories to Kazakhstan or the recruitment of Chinese workers in businesses set up in Kazakhstan). Still, the lack of transparency surrounding China's activities and the contents of the economic agreements make the spreading of rumours considerably easier⁶⁹.

⁶⁷ Prokopenko, V. & Urazova, D. (2014) Chinese migration to Kazakhstan-threat or myth?, *Tengrinews*. https://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Chinese-migration-to-Kazakhstan-threat-or-myth-256372/.

⁶⁸ Laruelle, M. (edit.) (2018) China's Belt And Road Initiative And Its Impact In Central Asia, *George Washington University, Central Asia Program*. p. 150. https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OBOR_Book_.pdf.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 101, 103-104.

5. Closing Remarks

For the purpose of this research project, Kazakhstan was chosen as a case study regarding the effectiveness and limitations of Chinese image and soft power in the region. The paper examined ways in which China is exercising its soft power, the narratives used for the promotion of a positive image, and its position when handling unpleasant issues in its relations with Kazakhstan.

The main conclusion regarding Chinese soft power is that it seems effective on a political and economic level, but not on a social one. The pro-Chinese sentiments of the economic elite clash with the general public's sinophobia and the efforts on cultural cooperation seem inadequate to reverse the existing wariness. Also, China's tendency to dulcify or even ignore issues of tension, adds to the mistrust. To a great extent, the main obstacle for Chinese soft power has to do with ingrained negative perceptions and it would be interesting to see if and how Beijing will try to rectify them. Lastly, it looks like the existing model of Chinese soft power reveals similar limitations when applied to different countries, and that is worth investigating in the future.