

**CHINESE SOFT POWER PRACTICE IN THE
KYRGYZ REPUBLIC:
«NARRATIVES»**

Chinese Soft Power Practice in the Kyrgyz Republic: «Narratives»

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a previous publication, *Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery: Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic*, it was noted that the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) has employed the open information environment in the Kyrgyz Republic (or Kyrgyzstan) to enhance its image through media entities based in both the Kyrgyz Republic and the PRC. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how China exercises narrative promotion as a soft power tool.

This study, conducted between January and August 2022, selected four media categories, as identified in previous research: 1) local media based in Kyrgyzstan, 2) Chinese state media (based in China), 3) Chinese media organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan, and 4) Chinese social media influencers. This research also studied two popular local independent media outlets which, as noted in the previous study, were not found to have any form of cooperation and exchange with the PRC. This research found that the majority of content published by media outlets associated with the PRC paint China in a positive image, omit, or minimize negative news reporting related to the country.

This research also identified three types of positive narratives related to China present across the four media types. The first narrative relates to the PRC's economic influence, focusing on the quantity of Chinese investment, government aid, and support for infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan. However, a closer look at the PRC economic narrative over time indicates that this narrative steadily declined from 2012 to 2022. The second narrative relates to issues related to Chinese governance within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR or Xinjiang). This includes specific TV and radio shows promoted within Kyrgyzstan showcasing Chinese government support for the culture, economic livelihood, and community infrastructure for the ethnic groups in XUAR, as well as their reportedly successful integration with Chinese people. Adverse reporting related to Chinese government actions in the region as well as those related to China's alleged role in exacerbating the COVID-19 pandemic are dismissed as "rumors." The third narrative examined related to efforts by China to be more proactive approach in responding to local concerns in Kyrgyzstan. This approach takes the form of media interviews with Chinese nationals in the Kyrgyz Republic and Kyrgyz elites who engage actively with the PRC, during which they present counter arguments responding to emerging local concerns. With the exception of Xinjiang-related issues, these responsive narratives most frequently attribute local concerns about the PRC – including issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic – as "stereotypes", "foreign influence", and a consequence of the US-China rivalry.

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INTRODUCTION

In a previous publication, *Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery: Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic*, it was observed that the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) has utilized the open information environment in the Kyrgyz Republic (or Kyrgyzstan) to enhance its image by deploying certain entities, like media organizations.¹

This study found that the PRC is taking measures to promote content that enhances its soft power capacities in the Kyrgyz Republic. These measures include sponsoring locally produced articles, videos, documentaries, and radio shows; facilitating the reprint of PRC content through cooperation agreements with Kyrgyz media outlets; organizing training programs and visits for local journalists to the PRC; deploying PRC media on the ground to ensure that content is tailored to local audiences; as well as a more active role by the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek in coordinating PRC-friendly content. The embassy provides financial and technical support and facilitates communication between PRC state and local Kyrgyz media organizations.

The purpose of this research is to present an example of how a state, in this case the PRC, can exercise narrative promotion as a soft power strategy.

Before shedding light on the PRC's soft power strategies, it is critical to explain the concept of soft power. In 1990, Joseph S. Nye's book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" introduced the idea of soft power to the field of international relations.² In this work, Nye defined soft power as "the ability to achieve what you want by attracting it rather than using orders/force or persuading it somehow (such as providing money)." Nye adds that "soft power is needed to create peace."³ In other words, soft power can be seen as a way of exporting a country's positive image to attract other countries towards a specific foreign policy goal.⁴ The essence of a country's soft power potential, according to Nye, is its ability to attract people with its culture, political ideals, and policies, depending on which a nation's soft power will grow or diminish in the eyes of the general public of the receiving nation. Today, soft power can be practiced through various tools, from education to tourism, gastronomy, and music. Mainstream media and social media also are effective tools for wielding soft power in the international system.

This study will focus on the manner in which the PRC exercises soft power through mainstream and social media in the Kyrgyz Republic, including the how it employs pro-China narratives. Additional country-level studies are especially important for examining the global impact and successes of PRC media engagement through public diplomacy.⁵ However, such analysis is a matter for another study.

¹ Niva Yau, "Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery: Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic", OSCE Academy in Bishkek, August 2022, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/ChinaAffairsENG.pdf>

² Nye, Joseph S. (1990). *Bound To Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.

³ Nye, *ibid.*

⁴ Akilli, Erman. (2016). *Türkiye'de Devlet Kimliği ve Dış Politika*. 2nd Edition. Ankara: Nobel Yayınları.

⁵ Hugo Jones, "Telling China's Story Well or Speaking in Tongues? Narrative Communication Challenges in China's Public Diplomacy", LSE, January 2022, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2022/01/12/telling-chinas-story-well-or-speaking-in-tongues-narrative-communication-challenges-in-chinas-public-diplomacy/>

METHODOLOGY AND PROJECT SCOPE

This research, conducted between January and August 2022, examined the narratives promoted by the PRC in Kyrgyzstan as part of its soft power practice. The research analyzed four categories of media: 1) local media in the Kyrgyz Republic, 2) Chinese state media (based in China), 3) Chinese state media operating locally in Kyrgyzstan, and 4) Chinese social media influencers. Due to the size of the research team and the limited time frame for the research, this report was unable to study all the content produced by the four media types named above. Instead, this report was strategically selective. First, only content that was published between January 2012 to January 2022 was analyzed in order to produce a representative sample of the narratives promoted during the past decade. Second, this research selected a handful of media outlets deemed to be representative of the type of media and extracted content from these media outlets based on their availability.

The first step of analysis involved the examination of 19,726 pieces of media content ranging from articles, transcripts, and social media posts within the above criteria. They were categorized based on medium type (online article, magazine article, TV program, radio show, social media text, social media text with photo, social media selfie video, social media documentary video, social media news video, social media selfie photo with text, and photo), publication date (d/m/y), author, actors quoted, tone (positive, neutral, pessimistic), location of the subject (China, bilateral (China-Kyrgyzstan), regional, international, Xinjiang), main topic (economics, politics, education, culture and lifestyle, Chinese medicine, Chinese food, tourism in China and visa matters, COVID-19, among others).

This research also included a content narrative analysis. This was done in order to make reading and examining the content feasible within the research timeframe. In circumstances in which the dataset was too large to analyze all the narratives independently, this research employed a narrative analysis on content concerning Chinese-Kyrgyz bilateral relations. This was applied to the two media outlets that are part of the group 'PRC media operating locally,' which included nearly 18,000 pieces of media content. This suggests that these Chinese state-run media organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan exist explicitly to advance Chinese soft power goals. They also draw attention to specific material related to the PRC as opposed to other media types, which did not publish nearly as much China-related content throughout the examined period.

After another round of selection, a total of 4,109 categorized pieces of media content were examined for tone and narrative analysis. As part of the tone and narrative content analysis process, this research employed the definitions and instructions created by Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Tamás Matura, Richard Q. Turcsányi and Matej Šimalčík for MapInfluenceCE in their reports *Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China's Influence* and *Careful or careless? Debating Chinese investment and 5G technology in Central Europe*.⁶ After thoroughly analyzing each article and reviewing various TV and radio shows, the tone of the content was deemed positive if it included themes and assessments that generated optimism and acceptance towards the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic. The content was categorized as neutral if it did not contain any assessments or judgements. If the content included an unfavorable impression of China or caused the audience to feel negative sentiments towards China in Kyrgyzstan, it was classified as pessimistic. This research defines narratives as explicit assessments and preferences made beyond factual descriptions. Prior to the research exercise, research team members conducted trainings and a pilot research project under the supervision of Matej Šimalčík, one of the authors from the MapInfluenceCE reports.

⁶ Karásková I., Bachulska A., Matura T., & Šimalčík, M., "Careful or careless? Debating Chinese investment and 5G technology in Central Europe", May 2021, https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Mapinfluence_policy-paper_careful-or-careless_A4_web_09-1.pdf
Turcsányi, R., Karásková, I., Matura, T., & Šimalčík, M., "Followers, challengers, or by-standers? Central European media responses to intensification of relations with China." *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 5(3).
https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AMO_central-europe-for-sale-the-politics-of-chinese-influence.pdf

Media categories

For the first media category– *local media in the Kyrgyz Republic* – we examined the following outlets: Slovo Kyrgyzstana (Слово Кыргызстана), Vecherniy Bishkek (Вечерний Бишкек), Azattyk (Азаттык) and Kloop (Клооп). All of these are primarily text-based media outlets that operate active websites with embedded search engines. This significantly facilitated the extraction of content for this study. Using these embedded search engines, this research extracted articles published between January 2012 to January 2022 1) whose titles contain the word “China” (Китай), and 2) whose contents discuss China as the main topic. Based on these criteria, the narrative study included 1,116 articles from Slovo Kyrgyzstana and Vecherniy Bishkek and 922 articles from Azattyk and Kloop.

The second media group included two programs that promote the image of the PRC abroad: the TV program Zhungogo Sapar (Джунгого сапар) and the radio program Kytai Terezesi (Кытай терезеси). As noted in a previous study, these outlets are produced by the Kyrgyz team of Xinjiang Television (新疆广播电视台), a state-run news outlet designed to promote positive Chinese narratives in Xinjiang.⁷ These two programs have been broadcasted on various state TV channels and radio stations in Kyrgyzstan since the early 2000s and provide daily updates on Xinjiang’s economic and social developments. They are an active part of China’s soft power strategy in the region. For this project, researchers watched, listened to, and transcribed word-for-word content produced during April 2022 for a total of approximately 30 hours of content. Researchers also analyzed the program’s visuals, music, and tone of speech. A total of 50 transcripts of Zhungogo Sapar and Kytai Terezesi were generated for the narrative study. We did not examine Zhungogo Sapar’s weekend programming, which broadcasts Chinese entertainment soap operas and was beyond the scope of this study’s analytical objectives.

Two PRC media organizations operating locally were studied as part of the third media subject group: *Silk Road Observer* and *Land Bridge*. *Silk Road Observer* (Развитие на Среднеазиатском шелковом пути /丝路新观察) is a newspaper based in Bishkek since late 2015 and is operated by China News Service’s Xinjiang office.⁸ The newspaper is registered as an accredited foreign media organization from the PRC by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁹ The newspaper operates two websites, one active between 2016 to 2020, and another active from 2020 to present.¹⁰ This research extracted a total of 14,626 articles from *Silk Road Observer* from the two websites as part of the content categorization. Due to the large volume of articles and limitations of our research staff, a total of 1,606 articles were categorized as ‘bilateral’ for the ‘location of the subject’ (see Methodology). *Land Bridge* (Контимост/大陆桥) is a 60-page monthly magazine printed in Urumqi, a city in Xinjiang, and produced jointly by the Xinjiang branch of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (对外友协), *Xinjiang Economic Daily* (新疆经济报), and Bishkek Humanitarian University. For this report, a total of 110 magazine issues published between 2012 to 2021 were physically collected, 2,811 articles were extracted from the magazines for content categorization, and again due to large volume and long texts on a printed magazine, 153 articles were categorized as ‘bilateral’ in subject location for the narrative study. The rationale for studying narratives of articles categorized as ‘bilateral’ aims identify narratives concerning Kyrgyzstan as part of China’s soft power projection.

The fourth media group analyzed were three Chinese social media influencers posting on Facebook. These users – Namila, Vera, and Qitong – whose accounts were created back-to-back between August and September 2020, are Russian-speaking, female Chinese nationals with a large following between 300,000 to over 500,000 followers. Their Facebook accounts were selected for this study

⁷ Niva Yau: 2022

⁸ Job.kg, <https://www.job.kg/vacancy/company/59620>

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyz Republic, «The list of correspondents of foreign media, accredited under Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyz Republic» [СПИСОК корреспондентов иностранных СМИ, аккредитованных при Министерстве иностранных дел Кыргызской Республики], 2020, <https://mfa.gov.kg/uploads/content/248/0374670c-f28d-352c-beb9-57ea7c9717eb.pdf>

¹⁰ Silk Road New Observer websites, <http://ru.siluxgc.com>
<https://www.silunews.kg>

given that they are the most active compared with other pro-Chinese social media accounts.¹¹ This research extracted a total of 1,117 Facebook posts from Namila (540), Vera (320), and Qitong (257) between August 2020 and June 2022, which were then placed within one of seven categories (text, text with photo, selfie video, documentary video, news video, selfie with text, and photo), as well as by subject location and topic (as above).

This research design has several limitations. All the written content examined was published in the Russian language. During the process of content extraction, it was found that only a minority of content published by the selected media outlets during the selected timeframe was published in the Kyrgyz language. This research instead focused on Russian language content as the objective is to capture the delivery of narratives and not the effectiveness on the side of the consumer. We did identify two programs promoting the PRC in the Kyrgyz language, the effectiveness of which will be the focus of our next report. Moreover, while this research aimed to study all content published from 2012 to 2022, *Silk Road Observer* has only existed since 2016, so we examined its content published between 2016 and 2022. Lastly, the majority of the studied content was published online, with only one exception of printed content, the *Land Bridge Magazine*. The findings of this research are therefore limited to representations of online media narratives. Based on the above methodologies and scope, a discussion of the three main narratives can be found below.

Narrative 1: PRC's Economic Contribution to the Kyrgyz Republic

In almost all of the media outlets studied in this research, the majority of content related to the PRC describes the country in a positive manner. In the local media category, *Slovo Kyrgyzstan* had the highest percentage of positive media coverage about China at 82.3% of the total content. Concerning private media outlet *Vecherniy Bishkek*, 65.5% of their content was positive in orientation towards the PRC. On the other hand, in *Azattyk* and *Kloop*, just 26.5% of the studied content was categorized as positive towards the PRC. All of the content studied from Zhungogo Sapar and Kytai Terezesisi, which were produced by Xinjiang Television, was classified as positive during the examined period. For the category of PRC media outlets operating locally, 93.1% of studied content was categorized as positive, and 98.2% of the content studied from Chinese social media influencers was positive in tone.

When examined across the years, significant changes in the number of articles categorized as positive can be observed. For some local media outlets, positive articles on the PRC peaked in 2012, 2013, and 2016, at 117, 111, and 114 articles, respectively. It is also observed that during the same period, other local media outlets published significantly fewer positive articles about the PRC. For local media outlets containing the least number of positive articles related to the PRC, this category peaked in 2017, with only 58 positive articles recorded. However, this research observed a significant increase in media content pessimistic in tone towards the PRC during 2018. This was likely a result of a high number of controversial incidents involving the PRC, including alleged adverse activities in Xinjiang province.

When it comes to the positive narratives towards the PRC, the content studied from local Kyrgyz and Chinese media operating in Kyrgyzstan were found to publish, to a varying degree, half a dozen similar narratives. Domestically and overseas, the PRC takes great effort to emphasize its economic achievements and contributions. At home, the PRC's economic achievements are described as the result of successful governance and is widely perceived as a legitimatizing factor for one-party rule

¹¹ Namila Namila Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/namila0910>
 Veryu-ne veryu Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/veryuneveryu2020>
 Qitong Channel Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/qitongchannel>

of the Chinese Communist Party.¹² Abroad, Chinese economic engagement and its contribution to local economies are often described as a result of friendly bilateral relations.¹³ As observed by this study, narratives related to the economic contributions of the PRC tended to be the primary focus in positive media coverage boosting Chinese soft power in Kyrgyzstan. These are: the PRC's economic successes and its qualities as a role model; the PRC's economic contribution to the Kyrgyz Republic and the world more broadly; bilateral relations and strengthening cooperation; the PRC as a good and reliable neighbor, friend and partner; the benefits of Chinese language and education; the richness of Chinese culture'; the mutually beneficial nature of relations with China; as well as shared culture and history.

While a positive presentation of the PRC is most frequently tied to narratives describing its role as an economic power, the category of Chinese social media influencers represented a major exception. These figures focused much more on efforts to describe and promote Chinese culture, food, and lifestyle as interesting and unique. The three other media categories studied (local Kyrgyz media, Chinese state media, and Chinese media operating in Kyrgyzstan – totaling nearly 3,000 pieces of content) were found to most frequently use narratives identifying China's economic influence, though they vary in the precise nature of topics discussed.

Within the category of local media and Chinese media operating locally in Kyrgyzstan, the PRC's economic contributions to the Kyrgyz Republic and the world more broadly were discussed in 26.5% and 27.1% of examined content, respectively. For example, one article in *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* quoted Chinese Ambassador Du Dewei as a leading contributor to the PRC's impact on the Kyrgyz Republic: "China's direct investment in the Kyrgyz economy accounts for about 43% of total foreign investment in your republic. These projects will have a positive impact on improving the living standards of [the] Kyrgyz people."¹⁴ Occasionally, descriptions of economic contributions also extend to other countries in the Central Asian region and the world more broadly.

When taking a closer look at the details of economic contribution that PRC-friendly narratives laid out in the two local media outlets studied in this research, the narrative of PRC economic contribution to the Kyrgyz Republic uses evidence largely focused on the quantity of Chinese investment, (181 times) and government aid and support towards infrastructure (98 times) (see Figure 1). Additionally, the economic contribution narrative also points to grants and scholarships for Kyrgyz students, (45 times) and Chinese companies creating jobs and supporting socio-economic development of people in Kyrgyzstan (44 times).

¹² Yuchao Zhu, "Performance Legitimacy" and China's Political Adaptation Strategy, June 2011, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Yuchao-Zhu/publication/227208021_Performance_Legitimacy_and_China's_Political_Adaptation_Strategy/links/579a0ef208ae2e0b31b14468/Performance-Legitimacy-and-Chinas-Political-Adaptation-Strategy.pdf?_sg%5B0%5D=started_experience_milestone&origin=journalDetail

Jinghan Zeng, "The Debate on Regime Legitimacy in China: bridging the wide gulf between Western and Chinese scholarship", 2014, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10670564.2013.861141>

¹³ "The foundation of self-confidence on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics [中国特色社会主义道路自信的根基]." ССР Theory [理论网], 18 Aug. 2017, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0818/c83859-29478726.html>.

¹⁴ Dmitriy Asheulov, "Kyrgyzstan-China: there is something to achieve" [КЫРГЫЗСТАН — КИТАЙ: ЕСТЬ К ЧЕМУ СТРЕМИТЬСЯ], SLoVo Kyrgyzstan, May 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=106248>

Figure 1. Subject Analysis of Narrative “PRC Economic Contribution in the Kyrgyz Republic” Among Local Media in the Kyrgyz Republic

Specific Subject	Times Used
PRC invests/intends to invest significantly in the Kyrgyz Republic	181
PRC provides significant aid to the Kyrgyz Republic	98
Chinese projects help improve infrastructure in the Kyrgyz Republic	83
PRC provides many grants for Kyrgyz students to study/intern in China	45
PRC projects create job/ support the socio-economic development of locals	44
Bilateral business cooperation has broad prospects	37
PRC provides free COVID vaccines/medical supplies to the Kyrgyz Republic	34
Chinese projects help improve energy infrastructure in the Kyrgyz Republic	33
PRC gives unconditional loans to improve infrastructure in the Kyrgyz Republic	33
PRC helps create transit potential for the Kyrgyz Republic	31
Trade between PRC and the Kyrgyz Republic is Complementary	27
PRC investments create factories/stimulate production in the Kyrgyz Republic	23
The Chinese market is accessible for Kyrgyz exports	17
PRC is the largest trading partner	16
Chinese laborers work cheaper than Kyrgyz (building roads, factories)	4
PRC investments bring high-tech to the Kyrgyz Republic	3
Income from Chinese tourists benefits the Kyrgyz economy	3
PRC and the Kyrgyz Republic fight economic crimes together	2
PRC investments bring new effective business ideas to the Kyrgyz Republic	2

Source: Compiled by author from content analysis of publicly available information as detailed in section Methodology and Project Scope.

Narrative 2: The success of the PRC's governance in XUAR

Since the early 2000s, the Chinese TV Program Zhungogo Sapar and radio program Kytai Terezesi have provided the most consistent reporting about the supposed governance successes of the PRC in XUAR.

The two local media outlets, studied in this research published eleven articles related to XUAR between 2012 to 2022. These articles are titled as follows:

- ▶ China shows camps to the world
- ▶ Charming western lands,
- ▶ Xinjiang – Portal of the second world economy
- ▶ The charm of Xinjiang national cultures
- ▶ Islam in Xinjiang – Thanks to the Party
- ▶ Truth on Xinjiang centers – Ethnic Kyrgyz not found,
- ▶ China will impose retaliatory sanctions against UK on Xinjiang,
- ▶ French writer about the real Xinjiang,
- ▶ Chinese MFA: Pompeo's statement on Xinjiang is nonsense,
- ▶ Xinjiang with own eyes – Atrocities not confirmed.¹⁵

Likewise, the Bishkek-based PRC newspaper *Silk Road Observer* generally refrained from publishing extensively on Xinjiang. Between 2016 and 2022, only 4.7% of articles published by *Silk Road Observer* discussed Xinjiang as the main topic, with most of them showcasing reportedly positive efforts by the Chinese government to support minority cultures. The Chinese social media influencers Namila, Vera, and Qitong also rarely post about Xinjiang, apart from select travel videos. *Land Bridge* magazine published slightly more content related to Xinjiang, with 15% of its articles discussing Xinjiang as the main topic between 2012 and 2022.

The daily television programs Zhungogo Sapar and Kytai Terezesi, which are dedicated to showing daily life in Xinjiang, are other components of China's soft power efforts in Kyrgyzstan. Presented by an ethnic Kyrgyz from Xinjiang who speaks in a Kyrgyz dialect with the use of some Mandarin Chinese words, the show primarily tells stories about the PRC's reported governance successes in the XUAR. Each show revolves around stories showcasing state efforts to elevate the ethnic Uighur population in their cultural expression, economic lives, community infrastructure, and their successful integration with the Chinese people.

¹⁵ Aliya Moldaliev, "China is showing "Camps" to the world" [Китай показывает миру "Лагеря"], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, August 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=109065>
Aliya Moldaliev, "China is showing "Camps" to the world" [Китай показывает миру "Лагеря"], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, August 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=108988>
Slovo Kyrgyzstan, "Beautiful Western Lands" [Очаровательные западные земли], August 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=108817>
Aliya Moldaliev, "Xinjiang-portal to second economics of the world" [СИНЬЦЗЯН — ПОРТАЛ ВТОРОЙ ЭКОНОМИКИ МИРА], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, August 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=108626>
Aliya Moldaliev, "The charm of Xinjiang National Cultures" [Очарование национальных культур Синьцзяна], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, July 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=108563>
Aliya Moldaliev, "Islam in Xinjiang. "Thanks to the party for that!"" [Ислам в Синьцзяне. «Спасибо партии за это!»], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, July 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=108462>
Slovo Kyrgyzstan, "The truth about Xinjiang Uyghur centers: Ethnic kyrgyz were not found there" [Правда о Синьцзян-Уйгурских центрах: Этнических кыргызов там не обнаружили], April 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=105124>
Vecherniy Bishkek, "China will impose retaliatory sanctions against the UK" [Китай введет ответные санкции против Великобритании], March 2021, https://www.vb.kg/doc/398849_kitay_vvedet_otvetnye_sankcii_protiv_velikobritanii.html
Nina Nichipirova, "French writer about real Xinjiang" [Французский писатель о настоящем Синьцзяне], Vecherniy Bishkek, February 2021, https://www.vb.kg/doc/397726_francyzskiy_pisatel_o_nastoiashem_sincziiane.html
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Figure 2. From left to right: Ethnic Kyrgyz host briefs the audience on Zhungogo Sapar (April 6, 2022); Ethnic Kyrgyz man receiving medical examination in XUAR (Zhungogo Sapar, April 8, 2022); A Chinese manager in XUAR teaching forestry work to members of local ethnic groups. (, Zhungogo Sapar, April 20 2022).

Zhungog Sapar and Kytai Terezesi also use history to paint China as a civilizing force in the region. In April 2022, these programs discussed the stories of two famous Chinese diplomats, Zhang Qian (c. 100 BC) and Ban Chao (32 – 102 CE) who were appointed by Chinese Emperors to resolve conflicts between Chinese farmers and the nomadic tribes from Western China and Central Asia. The programs sought to demonstrate how Chinese figures from the country’s East have historically played a positive role in present day Xinjiang. One episode of Kytai Terezesi notes that, “Ban Chao led 36 knights through the western valleys and manage different khans and conflicts”.¹⁶

The shows also discussed historical sites and archeological findings. Of note, archaeologists depicted in the shows depict Buddhism and the presence of the Chinese at the center of any ruins and artifacts found around the region. For example, upon finding the Kiyak-Kuduk beacon tower in Yuli County and other excavated artifacts that contain Chinese characters, the lead archaeologist told reporters that, “this proves that China ruled this western valley during the Tang dynasty; it tells us that thousands of years ago, Chinese border guards protected the Silk Road.”¹⁷ Another report showcasing a wall painting from the ninth century AD, the show runner explained: “this depicts the life of Chinese people here at that time.”¹⁸

The shows also discuss issues related to contemporary Xinjiang. In particular, they described the supposedly successful governmental assistance programs in the form of vocational training and interest-free loans to the population. Unemployed women and those in rural areas were shown to have enrolled in various short-term vocational schools to learn skills such as sewing and gardening, who would then find work at factories and greenhouses. The shows described several of these organized programs, for example, in Zherken, a vocational school that trains 10,000 young men each year from rural areas in skills such as woodworking. According to the reports, 95% of the graduates receive permanent employment upon completion of the training program.¹⁹ In Burul-Tokoi, PRC authorities spent \$192 million to construct of a modern agricultural vocational school, employing more than 114 families.²⁰

These shows consistently describe the state-led programs in a positive manner. The Kytai Terezesi radio on April 4, 2022 described how 363 families from villages of Chipan (棋盘), Kok-Jar (柯克亚), Ushar-Bash (乌夏巴什) were relocated to a newly built town called Ak-Tash (阿克塔什), a settlement that reportedly cost \$200 million. Tang Jong, a Chinese manager at the Ak-Tash settlement explained that “migration is only the first step, we promise to provide them with jobs.” A villager Kyn Nygar, who enrolled in a government-sponsored sewing course soon after she was relocated to Ak-Tash, left her life as a housewife and told reporters about her new life in the city:

¹⁶ 28 April 2022, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

¹⁷ 4 April, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

¹⁸ 27 April, Zhungogo Sapar, Bishkek.

¹⁹ 10 April, Kytai Terezesi, Bishkek.

²⁰ 14 April, Kytai Terezesi, Bishkek.

“the sewing factory where I work is close to my house and the kindergarten. After I take my child to kindergarten, I go to work.”²¹ Another story on the radio told of nomadic families living in the mountains in Jimsar County (吉木萨尔县) relocated to newly built town of Santai (三台) and were offered farming jobs.²²



Figure 3 (from left to right). A Chinese manager describes facilities in the newly constructed town of Chareke. (April 18, 2022, Zhungogo Sapar); Women work in a sewing factory in Charekele. Chinese text in the top right corner reads, “Love the Party, love the country, follow the rules and obey the law.” (April 18, 2022, Zhungogo Sapar); Member of a Kyrgyz family relocated from the mountains to a newly built town. (April 18, 2022, Zhungogo Sapar).



Figure 4. (From left to right) A Chinese shop owner in Xinjiang selling ethnic art and clothing to Chinese tourists. (April 11, 2022, Zhungogo Sapar); A Xinjiang local paints a festive lion on a wall in his village. The lion dance is a traditional Chinese practice to pray for good luck and fortune (April 14, 2022, Zhungogo Sapar).

These programs emphasize the reportedly successful integration and productive lives of ethnic Chinese migrants to XUAR. The ethnic Chinese living in Xinjiang were predominantly portrayed as helpers of the local population and as contributing to the development of Xinjiang’s business community. These shows also employed a narrative that Xinjiang enjoys cultural diversity with relation to the presence of ethnic Chinese in XUAR engaging in the practice of art forms like paper cutting and dough doll making.

These media reports described Chinese government investments to develop Xinjiang into a tourist destination. These included reports about subsidies provided to traditional herders to convert their traditional houses into guest houses to support ethnic Chinese tourism to the XUAR. Another example included \$18 million in funding to transform the village of Chong-Kushtai into tourist accommodations.²³ Kytai Terezesi also reported that 137 rural villages were converted to accommodate these tourists.²⁴

²¹ 4 April 2022, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

²² 6 April 2022, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

²³ 11 April, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

²⁴ 20 April, Kytai Terezesi radio, Bishkek.

Narrative 3: Responding to Local Concerns in the Kyrgyz Republic

This research also found that the media content analyzed attempts to paint the PRC as more proactive in responding to local concerns in Kyrgyzstan. All media outlets studied in this research employed narratives suggesting that the PRC is aware of potential issues to its image in the eyes the people and of the Kyrgyz Republic. With the exception of Xinjiang-related issues, these narratives most frequently describe concerns about the PRC as “stereotypes” or the result of “foreign influence” and the US-China rivalry.

One of the most frequently addressed so-called “stereotypes” in Chinese media operating in the Kyrgyz Republic is the common perception that the PRC produces and exports low-quality products without regard for the health of their consumers. In reality, the PRC has enforced a law for quality control on PRC-oriented products,²⁵ though, individual businessmen may prioritize whatever they see as more profitable in order to sell more on the Kyrgyz market. Due to low levels of disposable income in Kyrgyzstan, people have been unable to afford higher-quality products, resulting in the prevalence of lower-quality goods in the market for many years. An interview published in the *Silk Road Observer* directly addressed this concern on several occasions: “Most Kyrgyz people do not have a very good opinion about China because Kyrgyz traders supplied the country with cheap, low-quality Chinese products.”²⁶ It would be unfair to solely blame the PRC for this situation because, according to the *New Silk Road Observer*, “China produces all [types of] products, [and the] quality depends on the price.”²⁷ Another article notes that, “the Kyrgyz economy today is not so developed, [so] it can’t afford to buy more expensive products that basically perform the same functions; Chinese-made products are price competitive.”²⁸ Yet another article pinned the stereotype on Kyrgyz traders themselves, noting that, “Kyrgyz businessmen buy low-quality products, [and] that’s why the stereotype about Chinese quality has settled in the people’s minds.”²⁹

Chinese media operating locally tends to describe the presence of such local concerns as the result of so-called “foreign influence.” Particular attention is given to the United States as the culprit behind anti-China protests around the country. According to one article published in *New Silk Road Observer*, “anti-Chinese hysteria is organized by politically marginalized groups paid by the West, including the United States.”³⁰ Another article in *Vecherniy Bishkek* stated, “anti-Chinese sentiments is artificial and created by the United States, this is geopolitics and the struggle for influences of world powers, but many ordinary Kyrgyz citizens do not understand and their thoughts are dictated by the West.”³¹ This piece continued: “There could be [an] American presence responsible for the waves of anti-Chinese protests, especially given the present trade war between US and China.”³²

When not blaming outsiders for alleged “foreign influence”, Chinese media operating in Kyrgyzstan has taken other strategies to support Chinese interests. In some cases, they outright rejected criticism of Chinese state policies in the Kyrgyz Republic as false. According to an article in *Slovo Kyrgyzstan*, “there has been a lot of noise in the Kyrgyz society around Chinese grants and loans. There were protests, provocations and slander; allegedly there is Chinese expansion [and] a debt

²⁵ “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Product Quality”, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/englishnpc/Law/2007-12/12/content_1383813.htm

²⁶ Cholpon Urmalieva, “I will choose China again” [Выберу снова Китай], *Silk Road New Observer*, June 2018, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1682/201806/92216273346.shtml>

²⁷ Zhamilya Askarbek kyzy, “Meerim Keneshova: Whole world buys Chinese goods” [Мээрим Кенешева: Весь мир покупает товары в Китае], *Silk Road New Observer*, March 2018, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201803/372102888160909.shtml>

²⁸ Cholpon Urmalieva, “Busese from the first company in the world” [Автобусы от первой компании в мире], *Silk Road New Observer*, June 2019, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201906/78916253452110352127.shtml>

²⁹ Cholpon Urmalieva, “The future is beyond the Celestial Empire” [Будущее мира за Поднебесной], *Silk Road New Observer*, June 2019, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201906/56950544488963263.shtml>

³⁰ Nazgul Asanalieva, “Is Kyrgyzstan threatened by Chinese colonization?” [Грозит ли Кыргызстану Китайская колонизация?], *Slovo Kyrgyzstan*, January 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=102163>

³¹ Victoria Gunger, “Anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan. Conflict according to the Western scenario?” [Антикитайские настроения в Кыргызстане. Конфликт по западному сценарию], *Vecherniy Bishkek*, July 2019, https://www.vb.kg/doc/380011_antikitayskie_nastroeniia_v_kyrgyzstane_konflikt_po_zapadnomu_scenariu.html

³² Victoria Grigorenko, “Anti – Chinese rally in Bishkek. The expert does not rule out the “American trace” [Антикитайский митинг в Бишкеке. Эксперт не исключает «американского следа»], *Vecherniy Bishkek*, January 2019, https://www.vb.kg/doc/376096_antikitayskiy_miting_v_bishkeke_ekspert_ne_iskluchaet_amerikanskogo_sleda.html

trap. All these statements are not true and are not justified by anything.”³³ This research also identified examples in which criticism of Chinese government policies were described as anti-patriotic and against Kyrgyz national interests. According to an article in *Slovo Kyrgyzstan*, “rumors led to a series of anti-Chinese protests, which affected Chinese companies and joint projects; these provocations are not only anti-Chinese but also actually anti-Kyrgyz.”³⁴

This research also identified narratives designed to promote the success of the PRC in its management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of a total of 442 articles published between January 2020 and January 2022, *Silk Road Observer* devoted 195 articles (44% of its coverage) to showcasing the PRC’s success managing the pandemic, producing effective vaccines, repeating words of support from current and former Kyrgyz elites related to the pandemic, as well as humanitarian aid to the Kyrgyz Republic, Central Asia, and the world at large. Some of these articles took direct issue with particular pieces of popular narratives related to COVID-19 and the PRC, including former US President Donald Trump’s tweet that referred to the COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus.”³⁵ According to a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Trump’s inflammatory language helped spread anti-Asian content on Twitter and may have contributed to the perpetuation of racist attitudes.³⁶ Local Kyrgyz media shared articles from PRC state media actively denying rumors about COVID-19 in favor of the PRC. For example, *People’s Daily* and *Xinhua* inserted an article in *Vecherniy Bishkek* on February 14, 2020 entitled, “Which Virus is More Dangerous: Coronavirus or Prejudice?”. The article labeled any judgements and rumors towards origin of COVID-19 as prejudiced and racist against the Chinese people.³⁷

³³ Slovo Kyrgyzstan, “Chinese ambassador Xiao Qinghua: “Gently preserving traditional friendship, together we will open a beautiful future” [Посол КНР Сяо Цинхуа: «Бережно сохраняя традиционную дружбу, вместе откроем прекрасное будущее», February 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=102564>

³⁴ Aliya Moldaliev, “Discord is sown from outside, China believes” [Раздор сеют извне, считает Китай], Slovo Kyrgyzstan, December 2019, <https://archive.slovo.kg/?p=112134>

³⁵ “Trump’s ‘Chinese Virus’ tweet helped lead to rise in racist anti-Asian Twitter content: Study”, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-helped-lead-rise-racist/story?id=76530148>

³⁶ “Racist anti-Asian hashtags spiked after Trump first tweeted ‘Chinese virus,’ study finds”, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/19/trump-tweets-chinese-virus-racist/>

³⁷ Nina Nichipirova, “Which virus is more dangerous: Coronavirus or prejudice?” [Какой вирус опаснее: Коронавирус или предрассудки?], *Vecherniy Bishkek*, February 2020, https://www.vb.kg/doc/385432_kakoy_virys_opasnee: koronavirys_ili_predrassydki.html

CONCLUSION

As the second report in a series of studies aimed at examining the PRC's soft power practice through media, this research paper set out to understand the type of narratives related to China that are promoted across different media types.

This research found that Chinese media organizations contributing to the PRC's soft power initiatives employ overwhelmingly positive narratives. The majority of these narratives are explicit in describing the PRC's economic contribution to the Kyrgyz Republic. The mapping of the sentiment analysis of the content examined in the study provides additional analytical space for future research, particularly concerning the accuracy of the PRC's economic contribution to the Kyrgyz Republic and its impact on Kyrgyz-Chinese bilateral relations. While beyond scope of this research, these findings could support scholarly work focused on international relations of the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly those examining economic cooperation, investments, and foreign aid.

The two Xinjiang-produced media programs –Zhungogo Sapar and Kytai Terezesi – analyzed in this study depicted 1. The supposed successes of governmental assistance programs to the local populations and 2. A picture of ethnic harmony centered around cultural expression, economic livelihood, and community infrastructure, as well as the successful integration between the Chinese people and minority populations. This second narrative adds perspective to global studies around the Xinjiang issue, in particular the PRC's messaging around its alleged conduct in the XUAR in relation to its neighbors, like Kyrgyzstan. While these two findings reflect a key PRC approach to promote more positive messages about itself, this research also found that the PRC has taken a more proactive approach to respond to prominent local concerns.

The results of this research suggests the need for additional studies to explore what the impact of exposure to the PRC's soft power narratives could be. One potential result could be the creation of a more positive perception of Chinese investments among the Kyrgyz public. It also raises the question of whether Chinese soft power could reduce opposition to new economic projects involving the PRC.

The results of this study showed that the PRC is taking great efforts to wield soft power influence in Kyrgyzstan. This study also aimed to provide space for scholars to initiate future studies comparing media influence in the Kyrgyz Republic from the PRC with that of other countries, including examinations of the local impacts of such exported narratives. The study also uses the Kyrgyz Republic as a case study in a global conversation about the PRC's soft power influence and offers new possibilities for regional competitive studies. The report provided a methodological framework that can be replicable elsewhere, but acknowledges several limitations that can support improved studies in the future. Hopefully, this report sheds some light on what narratives could be inserted by foreign actors to promote its soft power, build a positive image, and foster influence abroad.