

**MANAGING SENTIMENTS IN THE
WESTERN PERIPHERY:
*CHINESE INFORMATION OPERATIONS IN
THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC***

Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery

Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic

Niva Yau

© 2022 OSCE Academy in Bishkek

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Extracts of this report may be quoted without special permission for academic purposes, provided that a standard source credit line is included.

The views expressed in this report are exclusively those of the authors and are not necessarily shared or endorsed by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

Author: Niva Yau

Design: Tatiana Kirgizbaeva, Studio “De_tally”

August 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
INTRODUCTION	8
METHODOLOGY	12
PROJECT SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS	13
GOOD VIBES ONLY: PRC-PROMOTIONAL CONTENT IN KYRGYZ MEDIA	14
<i>Inserting Content via Tours</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Inserting Content via Reprint</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Inserting Content & the Role of PRC Entities</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Inserting Content on Social Media</i>	<i>29</i>
A REALITY CHECK: ASSESSING THE PRC INFORMATION INFLUENCE	36
CONCLUSION	39
APPENDIX 1.	41
APPENDIX 2.	43
APPENDIX 3.	44

TABLES

Table 1. List of information platforms with high PRC-positive engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Table 2. List of tours and trainings attended by Kyrgyz media entities in the PRC.

Table 3. Social media presence of local medias with PRC cooperation.

Table 4. Top 20 most engaged with posts with PRC related content on Facebook in the Kyrgyz Republic between January 2019 and February 2022.

Table 5. Top 20 most engaged with posts with PRC related content on Instagram in the Kyrgyz Republic between January 2019 and February 2022.

Table 6. PRC personality influencers on Facebook and TikTok with a presence in the Social Media landscape of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Table 7. Facebook groups and Instagram pages dedicated to PRC affairs available in the Kyrgyz Republic.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Interviewee List.

Appendix 2. Research methodology for the top 20 most engaged with posts related to the PRC between January 2019 and February 2022.

Appendix 3. Research methodology for size of fanbase coming from the Kyrgyz Republic among the top 10 most engaged with posts in 2021.

Author

Niva Yau is a Senior Researcher at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek and a Fellow of the Eurasia Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) in Philadelphia. Her work follows Global China affairs with a particular focus on China's foreign policy, trade and security in its western neighbourhood, including Central Asia and Afghanistan. E-mail: t.yau@osce-academy.net.

Citation

Niva Yau (2022) "Managing Sentiments in the Western Periphery: Chinese Information Operations in the Kyrgyz Republic", OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

Acknowledgement

The author wishes to acknowledge the expert assistance of Matej Šimalčík during the research planning and editorial processes, as well as that of Aizat Shailoobek and Asylgul Kanatbekova in local media analysis. The author would also like to offer their deepest thanks to the two anonymous Media Consultants for sharing their insights into the personnel of the media sector in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Matej Šimalčík is the Executive Director of the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, a think tank based in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria that focuses on foreign and security policy issues related to East Asia. Matej's research looks at China's economic and political presence and influence in Central Europe, disinformation, elite relations and the role of European legal instruments in dealing with China. He has a background in law (Masaryk University) and International Relations (University of Groningen).

Aizat Shailoobek is a Senior Research Assistant at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. She is interested in China affairs in Kyrgyzstan and is the author of "Discussing Sinophobia in Kyrgyzstan," in Central Asian Affairs. Aizat received BA in American Studies from the International University of Kyrgyzstan, and an MA Degree in Central Asian Studies from the American University of Central Asia. Previously, she was a contributor at Global Voices.

Asylgul Kanatbekova is a Junior Research Assistant at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. She specializes in data analysis in research, applying this to interests in Central Asian migration and poverty issues. Asylgul received a Bachelor's degree in Management of State Property from the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic and a Master's degree in Demography and Population Studies from the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, the Russian Federation. Previously, she worked as a consultant for the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central Asia has been facing an unprecedented level of PRC engagement on all fronts. These engagements are developing at a rapid rate across the political, economic and social spheres. This report set out to show that PRC engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic goes beyond the economic and military spheres, and is no longer working exclusively with local elites. The media sector serves the critical strategic role of mass communication and information dissemination. Domestically, the Chinese government has mastered exercising control over its own information environment both online and offline despite formal constitutional guarantees of the freedom of the press and access to information. The PRC also recognizes the need to control the information environment in foreign countries.

The Kyrgyz Republic has been chosen as a case study in a 2-year research project investigating the tactics, narratives, and effectiveness of PRC media engagement in Central Asia. This first research report found that the most convenient avenue of information influence is the active spread of PRC-friendly content to promote positive views of the PRC to crowd out messages that are inconvenient to the PRC. There are three main characteristics of strategies employed by the PRC: 1) inserting content within Kyrgyz media, 2) local presence of PRC media, and 3) engagement on social media. There is a cross-cutting and mutually supportive relationship between all these strategies. For example, local presence of PRC media strengthens production capacity of locally tailored PRC-friendly materials, especially when combined with direct access to local PRC entities and local elites through diplomatic channels.

There are a total of 22 information platforms with high positive PRC engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic. Their PRC-friendly content is sustained and incorporated directly via sponsored trips and specific training programs in the PRC, and/or agreed and paid-for inserts from PRC media. Despite the absence of a strict condition to publish materials from trips to the PRC, it can be observed that most Kyrgyz journalists who participated in these visiting trips and specific trainings published on materials learned from the PRC instructors during or after their trips. Most commonly, Kyrgyz journalists published diary-style impressions of the PRC, such as those covering visits to factories. In practice, the majority of journalists targeted by the PRC recognize and are sober about the effects of PRC propaganda and influences to showcase, one-sidedly, the best aspects of the PRC. For most, it is out of convenience that they participate in visiting trips and specific trainings in order to have content to work with. Publishing the materials learned from the PRC instructors is a pragmatic choice.

At least 9 Kyrgyz media entities have signed cooperation agreements with PRC entities, with some dating back to the early 2000s. The scope of these agreements varies, from allowing Kyrgyz media organisations to freely reprinting published content as they see fit, committing to regularly publishing PRC-made domestic and world news, jointly producing specific content, including specific paid-for content in their reporting, and more. According to the few publicly available records about these cooperation agreements, for example the former Director of KTRK in a Facebook post, KTRK received \$700,000 in funding from the PRC between 2017 to 2020 for broadcasting a propaganda program daily, as well as the analogue version on its radio station. However, while inserting content from PRC media into Kyrgyz media gives large control to the PRC in crafting its own narratives, the PRC media often fail to tailor to the tastes of the Kyrgyz public. This stems from a severe lack of understanding of local issues.

The PRC Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic is the most important actor in planning and coordinating PRC-friendly content, it provides direct and indirect support to some Kyrgyz media organisations such as funding, equipment and free consultations on PRC. At least 5 interviewees explained the lack of reporting on Xinjiang issues as due to fear of spoiling cooperation with the Embassy. The

attempt to influence foreign policy preferences amongst Kyrgyz journalists and media professionals was prominent.

According to a list published by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2022, there are three media entities from the PRC registered in the Kyrgyz Republic as a foreign media. These are Xinhua, Wen Wei Po and the Silk Road Observer. There are also two other PRC media entities, Dolon TV and Land Bridge, who work locally as private media without registration as a foreign media. Most of these PRC medias have direct ties to the PRC Propaganda Department and receives financial support from the Chinese government. While their own local channels are exceptionally poor at reaching the local Kyrgyz audience, they continuously produce and distribute PRC-friendly content which are fed by on the ground trends and events. These PRC media entities are effectively middlemen between PRC entities working in the Kyrgyz Republic and local media organisations. Most importantly, the local presence of PRC media, feeding PRC-friendly content to Kyrgyz media, ensures a maximum degree of editorial censorship and narrative dissemination.

Social media has become the latest addition to PRC information operations. There are dozens of PRC social media influencers and pages who operate in the Russian language, and some have placed ads targeting audience in the Kyrgyz Republic. Their content combines PRC cultural stories, personal lifestyle stories, light commentary on domestic and global news, and food and tourism stories, all in the Russian language. It can also be observed that their content help advances the geopolitical interests and positions of the PRC, such as portraying the United States as a weak country, tearful speech about War in Ukraine following statements published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. PRC ingression strategies towards the Kyrgyz media sector have been changing since 1992, especially with latest turn toward social media.

Overwhelming evidence from this report points to growing Chinese engagement in the media sector, targeting technocrats in the media space and the mass media audience. The Chinese whole-of-society influence building approach is becoming more and more visible in Central Asia. In practice, the Chinese approach to influence is founded on creating dependencies between targeted sectors and PRC actors. In its approach to the media sector of the Kyrgyz Republic, the PRC has taken advantage of the relatively free information space in the country. It is clear there are areas of vulnerability in the media space of the Kyrgyz Republic which can be addressed to manage media manipulations from foreign influences.

Moving forward, the Kyrgyz Republic can expect a steady increase of Chinese engagement toward its media sector. The rationale for media cooperation must be tailored to reflect the national security interests of the Kyrgyz Republic, such that initiatives do not interfere with domestic Kyrgyz political affairs. Left undealt with, catering to Chinese interest can potentially turn the Kyrgyz media sector into a tool of influence over official state positions on critical issues. It is in the interest of any given country to maximise benefits and minimise risks when working with a foreign partner, and the PRC is not an exception.

INTRODUCTION

Sharing a 3000-km border with China in the west, Central Asia plays a vital role in the short and long-term goals of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since independence from the Soviet Union, the region has been facing an unprecedented level of PRC engagement on all fronts. These engagements are developing at a rapid rate across the political, economic and social spheres. Often, political and economic engagements are the most visible and most locally discussed aspects of influence in Central Asia and elsewhere. This is largely due to the degree of public attention paid to the affairs of the political elites and availability of public information on trade statistics. By contrast, PRC engagement in other sectors is much less visible due to the technocratic nature of those targeted, for example those working in the sector of military, law, education and media.

Make no mistake, PRC engagement in these other sectors is just as active as in the political and economic spheres. When promoting its objectives abroad and shaping events around the world, the PRC uses a whole-of-society approach to achieve its goals and spread its messages. This necessitates building friendships across all sectors, including political, business, military, law enforcement, media, academia and technology, and creating dependencies between these sectors and the PRC.

Increasingly, creating global influence and drawing countries into the Chinese orbit is not just about creating practical support for PRC policies but about promoting the set of norms and values approved by the PRC. Eventually, the other countries are expected to adopt PRC norms and values that they can use in genuinely defending the PRC on both domestic and global issues. This concept is described at length in various Chinese foreign policy documents and is referred to as “thoughtwork” (思想工作).¹ In its most basic form, it aims to induce PRC-friendly narratives in order to crowd out and gradually lead to the dismissal of other information that is inconvenient to the PRC. A meaningful measure of vulnerability to PRC influence thus requires a comprehensive examination of all affected sectors in a given country.

The media sector serves the critical strategic role of mass communication and information dissemination. Domestically, the Chinese government has mastered exercising control over its own information environment both online and offline despite formal constitutional guarantees of the freedom of the press and access to information. By subjecting media to strict information laws and actively silencing individuals, the PRC has reached a state of near eradication of critical voices. In 2021, the PRC was ranked 177th out of the 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).²

The PRC also recognizes the need to control the information environment in foreign countries. Existing research has shown that the PRC, at minimum, is actively influencing media abroad to induce PRC-friendly narratives and suppress messages it perceives of as anti-PRC. It does this by:

- ▶ Placing advertorials in foreign media which promote PRC-friendly narratives, creating reliance on PRC advertorial income, exerting pressure and/or withholding advertising if editors fail to comply;

¹ People's Daily, “Xi Jinping emphasized during the 30th collective study of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, Strengthen and improve international communication, show a true, three-dimensional and comprehensive China” [习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时强调 加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国], June 2021, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0602/c64093-32120102.html>.

Qiushi, “Promoting the continuous strengthening of propaganda and ideological work - some leaders of the central propaganda and cultural units talk about the mission and tasks of the new era” [推动宣传思想工作不断强起来 ——部分中央宣传文化单位负责人谈新时代使命任务], February 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2019-02/22/c_1124151326.htm.

² Reporters without borders, “2021 World press Freedom Index: Journalism, the vaccine against disinformation, blocked in more than 130 countries”, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>.

- ▶ Recruitment of PR companies to facilitate penetration of PRC-friendly narratives into foreign media;
- ▶ Mergers with and acquisitions of foreign media entities and the exertion of pressure on acquired media to avoid anti-PRC coverage;
- ▶ Rewarding and punishing foreign journalists on the basis of their reporting on the PRC, by offering in-China training and trips and through employment termination, diplomatic and legal intimidation.³

These are only some known examples. In some countries these tactics are highly effective in undermining the nature of journalism as a watchdog and a platform enabling informed decisions. Even within their own countries, many journalists and media entities are restricted in their freedom to report on sensitive issues and local affairs relating to the PRC. The captured media become a tool for disseminating the views of the PRC, sustaining a deceptively positive image of China and jeopardizing informed foreign policy discourse in the affected countries.

Amongst countries that are less resilient to PRC media influence, Chinese influence in the information sector increasingly go beyond simple control of the nation's image abroad. The captured media are used to create domestic propaganda which offer the illusion of foreign support for Chinese domestic and global policies.⁴ The PRC has also exported its domestic media control experience to support ally regimes. In Cambodia, evidence suggests that after Beijing exported media control skills to the country, the PRC-friendly Hun Sen regime won all 124 seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections, as compared to only 68 in the previous election; in Vietnam, the import of Beijing's cyber-security law in 2018 enabled the regime's tight grip on the Internet, and resulting in restrictions of the right to information and freedom of expression.⁵

In October 2020, the Investment Screening Regulation entered force in the European Union (EU).⁶ The regulation aims to harmonize standards of investment screening across the EU, including the use of media by hostile foreign powers to spread disinformation to disrupt security and public order. In December 2016, the Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act entered force in the United States.

No existing research has studied the PRC as an actor of information influence in Central Asia. Millions of ethnic Uyghur, Dungan, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik who were historically mobile populations, today live on both sides of China's border with Central Asia, in Xinjiang (East Turkestan) and the Central Asian states. Since independence, the latter have been a special target of PRC information influence due to concerns over regional public support for East Turkestan independence.

The Kyrgyz Republic entered into diplomatic relations with the PRC in January 1992. It shares an approximately 1,000 km long border with the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture in Xinjiang, of which the majority population is ethnic Kyrgyz.⁷ The Kyrgyz Republic is a founding member of

³ International federation of Journalists, "The China story: reshaping the world's media", June 2020, https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Report_2020_-_The_China_Story.pdf.

Reporters without borders, "RSF Report: 'China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order'", March 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/reports/rsf-report-chinas-pursuit-new-world-media-order>.

Sarah Cook, "The Implications for Democracy of China's Globalizing Media Influence", Freedom House, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-and-media/2019/media-freedom-downward-spiral>.

⁴ Matej Simalcik, "China's Fight Against 'Erroneous Opinions'", China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, September, 2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/chinas-fight-against-erroneous-opinions/>.

⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/reports/rsf-report-chinas-pursuit-new-world-media-order>.

⁶ "Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2019 establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union", 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/452/oj>.

⁷ For context, in 2020, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic reported its ethnic Kyrgyz population to be 4.8 million; in 2019, the government of the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture reported its ethnic Kyrgyz population to be 163,863. However, the majority of the ethnic Kyrgyz population in Kizilsu lives in remote areas and has little access to public services. Experts in the Kyrgyz Republic estimate the ethnic Kyrgyz population in Kizilsu to be around

the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has shown diplomatic and practical support for the PRC's policy in Xinjiang. It took part in a 69-country joint statement in support of the human rights situation in the PRC in June 2021 and has extradited dozens of Chinese ethnic minorities to the PRC since the early 2000s. Prior to the pandemic, the PRC was the largest trading partner of the Kyrgyz Republic, with heavy concentrated on imports. In 2021, 41.9% of Kyrgyz external debts were owned by Chinese policy banks, amounting to roughly a quarter of its GDP.⁸ As the only country in Central Asia with a democratic commitment, the Kyrgyz Republic and its citizens enjoy access to relatively free and independent media.

THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC AND RELATIONS WITH THE PRC

In 2021, the Kyrgyz Republic was ranked 79th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index;⁹ 115th out of 167 countries on the Democracy Index¹⁰; and 99th out of 139 countries on the Rule of Law Index.¹¹

Though considered a regional outlier in terms of its democratic governance structure, the Kyrgyz Republic has undergone rapid deterioration in its democratic structure in the past five years. After the 2017 Presidential Election, the Jeenbekov administration initiated constitutional amendments which increased and strengthened government powers and coalition of political parties. At the same time, Omurbek Tekebayev, known as the “father of the constitution,” was arrested for corruption, sentenced to 8 years in prison and removed from public life.¹² In 2019, investigative journalists who had worked on exposing the country's largest corruption scandal, featuring former customs official Matraimov, faced threats and arrests despite Jeenbekov's pledge to fight corruption.¹³

In 2020, the Parliamentary Election was followed by accusations of vote buying and vote manipulation, which led opposition parties to protest the results.¹⁴ Overnight, the Kyrgyz Republic witnessed nationwide unrest, with destruction and the capture of strategic government and commercial buildings, as well as government positions, and lootings. Some political groups freed several political prisoners, including Sadyr Zhaparov and Almazbek Atambayev.¹⁵ The former was quickly appointed as the

300,000.

National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, “5.01.00.03 Total population by nationality”, <http://www.stat.kg/ru/statistics/download/dynamic/316/>.

National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China, “Statistical Bulletin of the National Economic and Social Development of Kyzilsu Kirgiz Autonomous Prefecture in 2018” [克孜勒苏柯尔克孜自治州2018年国民经济和社会发展统计公报], December 2019, <https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/jjz/201912/1139217.shtml>.

⁸ Radio Freedom, “Kyrgyzstan spent 29.5 billion soms on servicing public debt in 2021,” [На обслуживание госдолга в 2021 году Кыргызстан потратил 29,5 млрд сомов], February, 2022, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31705876.html>.

⁹ Reporters without borders, “Index 2021”, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>.

¹⁰ Economist Intelligence Unit, “2021 rankings”, 2021, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/#mktoForm_anchor.

¹¹ World Justice Project, “WJP Rule of Law Index”, 2021, <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2021>.

¹² Maksat Elebesov, “See the most important and memorable events of 2017 in the material of the agency Sputnik Kyrgyzstan”, [Самые важные и запомнившиеся события 2017 года смотрите в материале агентства Sputnik Кыргызстан], December, 2017, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20171231/glavnye-sobytiya-v-kyrgyzstane-v-2017-godu-1037095247.html>.

¹³ Maksat Elebesov, “The main events in Kyrgyzstan in 2019-timeline”, [Главные события в Кыргызстане в 2019 году-timeline], January, 2020, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/20200102/2019timeline-1046670956.html>.

Civicius Monitor, “Kyrgyzstan: Journalists and media threats, attacks as ex-President is arrested”, October 2019, <https://monitor.civicius.org/updates/2019/10/31/kyrgyzstan-journalists-and-media-face-threats-attacks-ex-president-arrested/>.

¹⁴ U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, “Kyrgyz Republic 2020 Human Rights Report”, 2020, <https://kg.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/190/KYRGYZ-REPUBLIC-2020-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>.

¹⁵ Radio Freedom, “Convicted ex-deputy Sadyr Zhaparov was released and spoke on the square”, [Осужденный экс-депутат Садыр Жапаров вышел на свободу и выступил на площади], October,

Acting President by Jeenbekov, who stepped down during the unrest. A Presidential Election was held in 2021, and Zhaparov's rise to power was complete.

The Zhaparov administration undertook a constitutional referendum and successfully changed the political power structure back to a presidential system which centralized power with the President. This structure initially led to violent revolutions in the 2000s. After the transition, the Democracy Index changed its labelling of the regime of the Kyrgyz Republic from a hybrid democratic regime to an authoritarian one.¹⁶ The Zhaparov administration also adopted a legal framework which allows authorities to remove online information which is considered “fake” or “inaccurate” by the state.¹⁷ In 2022, the Zhaparov administration nationalized the country's largest industrial project, the Kumtor gold mine. This led to a lawsuit from the Canadian company Centerra which had operated the mine and problematic legal procedures and entanglements.

In no way is this research meant to discourage meaningful relationships between media and foreign partners and investors, especially those from other democratic countries. Foreign partnerships are often a prerequisite for reporting on stories which involve multiple jurisdictions and are proving increasingly common in a globalized world. However, any countries who claim a democratic commitment should inform and protect their publics from information manipulation from third parties.

2020, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30877392.html>.

¹⁶ Institute of media policy, “Presidential form of government: Kyrgyzstan has lost its position in the ranking in terms of democracy”, [Президентская форма правления: Кыргызстан потерял позиции в рейтинге по уровню демократии], February, 2022, <http://media.kg/news/prezidentskaya-forma-pravleniya-kyrgyzstan-poteryal-poziczii-v-rejtinge-po-urovnyu-demokratii/>.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Kyrgyzstan Events of 2021”, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan>.

METHODOLOGY

With the above in mind, the author chose to use the Kyrgyz Republic as a case study in a 2-year research project investigating the tactics, narratives, and effectiveness of PRC media engagement in Central Asia. The main research question asks to what extent is the PRC effectively exploiting the relatively free information space in the Kyrgyz Republic. The outcome of this research project is intended to improve information transparency for populations living in the Kyrgyz Republic and present an example of how a foreign actor can attempt to manipulate public information using the example of the PRC. Additionally, the outcome of this research is intended to aid development by identifying areas of vulnerability which allow for these manipulations and policies to take place, thereby helping to protect the Kyrgyz media sector from foreign influence which undermines its democratic commitment.

This is the first report in a series of three reports which share the above-mentioned objectives. The main objective of Report One is to understand how the PRC influences the information spaces in the Kyrgyz Republic, using direct and indirect tactics, to promote PRC-positive content. Report One is expected to inform the later research stages concerning the content analysis of PRC-friendly media and their effectiveness, which will be presented in Reports Two and Three respectively. Information space is defined in this research as the various channels offering free and accessible information to the public.

Instead of looking strictly at traditional media outlets, this research adopted a broad definition of the information space, with the intention of capturing, as much as possible given the time and resources available for the project, all platforms offering public information and those individuals who play a role in information dissemination and the formation of public opinion. Engagement is understood to occur if a platform or an individual whose content and/or profession is strongly related to the PRC, regardless of whether such engagement is friendly or inconvenient in nature. While the PRC constantly pursues influence building across several sectors in order to have instruments in place to meet core national objectives, these influences are used differently depending on the precise Chinese interests at the time.

In order to capture these changes, particularly in terms of the narratives inserted in local media, this research looks at content which is of both friendly and inconvenient natures. Friendly content is defined as that which highlights aspects of engagement which provide positive background support to PRC policies in the local country and beyond. Typical of this is narratives such as the PRC as an unconditional donor of aid and scholarship, domestic developmental success and sharing of experiences, cultural similarities and historical relationship with the local country, and so on. Keeping in mind that not all PRC inconvenient content is in its nature critical of the PRC nor necessarily highlights the negative conduct of the PRC, the definition instead focuses on whether or not the content is helpful to PRC policies. Thus, inconvenient content is defined as that which highlights aspects of engagement which provide negative support for PRC policies in the local country and beyond, such as content covering PRC human rights violations, problematic treatment of foreign labour, environmental violations in foreign countries, voices of Chinese dissents, local economic dependencies on the PRC, and so on.

These definitions facilitate better understanding of content which is of friendly or inconvenient natures to the PRC. With this in mind, this research studied six categories of platforms offering public information and individuals who play a role in information dissemination. They are:

- ▶ Kyrgyz state-owned and private traditional media such as newspapers, TV and radio;
- ▶ PRC-funded media entities operating in the Kyrgyz Republic;
- ▶ leading Kyrgyz social media influencers by sector, such as political, business, entertainment, religion;

- ▶ citizen media such as Facebook groups;
- ▶ the TV and film industries;
- ▶ local universities offering journalism programs.

The research first began with the gathering of a list of the 154 active Kyrgyz state-owned and private traditional media organisations; five active PRC-funded traditional media entities working in the Kyrgyz Republic; 78 leading Kyrgyz social media influencers; 33 popular citizen media groups; three Kyrgyz films which have a PRC-related story; and 15 local universities offering journalism programs. Based on these lists, an open-source search was conducted in Russian, Kyrgyz and Chinese languages for each of the Kyrgyz entities' reported engagement with the PRC. An additional open-sourced search was also conducted in Chinese language using the key words “China Kyrgyzstan media cooperation” (中国吉尔吉斯斯坦媒体合作), “China Kyrgyzstan media” (中国吉尔吉斯斯坦媒体), “China Kyrgyzstan journalist” (中国吉尔吉斯斯坦媒体记者); and in the Russian language using the same key words “China Kyrgyzstan media cooperation” (Китайско-Кыргызское медиа сотрудничество), “China Kyrgyzstan media” (Китайско Кыргызской медиа), “China Kyrgyzstan journalist” (Китайско Кыргызский журналист).

This open-source process generated over 40 study subjects across the study categories which have engaged the most with the PRC. This list of subjects and open-source evidence of their engagement with the PRC were used to draft interview questions and identify individuals who were involved with these engagements for the interview process. Between November 2021 and February 2022, in the Kyrgyz capital city of Bishkek, the southern largest city, Osh, and online, a total of 73 interviews were conducted with media experts, current and former employees of identified PRC-friendly Kyrgyz media, PRC-funded media, local media NGOs, private media, current and former administrators of identified citizen media, social media influencers, leaders in the film industry, journalism educators and politicians who engaged with PRC topics in the public discourse (see Appendix 1. List of Interviewees).

Project Scope and Limitations

The broad definition of information space used in this study was adopted in hopes of capturing as much engagement as possible, regardless of whether the content of the platform and/or conduct of the individual are friendly or inconvenient to the PRC. Given this breadth of definition, six months were spent in the fact-finding process. The process relied mostly on open-source research and the interviewing of selected respondents. Over 40 study subjects were identified based on the degree of evidence pointing to their engagement with the PRC. Overall, the most engaged media with the PRC are the traditional Kyrgyz media, with a total of 17 having received a form of donation from PRC entities, having records of signing cooperation agreements with a PRC entity, frequently disseminating exclusive PRC-friendly materials such as interviews with and op-eds from the Chinese Ambassador, actively reporting on and accessing PRC commercial activities in the Kyrgyz Republic, and/or attending media forums or sponsored visits and training in the PRC.

As part of the open-source research process, literature review it was found that there has been a severe lack of research conducted on the media sector in the Kyrgyz Republic in general. As a result, this research could not rely on previous evidence-based research in identifying pro-government or opposition media. Furthermore, there is a dearth of researchers and experts who are aware of PRC influence in the Kyrgyz media sector. In the absence of this expertise, this research necessitated that the researchers learn about and identify such media outlets based upon how they report on their own operations, on the ground knowledge, and preliminary observations. Two media consultants were also involved in the research in order to bridge the gaps in knowledge.

Additionally, conducting research on social media to study citizen media and social media influencers proved difficult due to the absence of an embedded search engine on Instagram, the most popular platform in the Kyrgyz Republic. Systemic searches were more manageable on Facebook due to the

availability of third-party management and analysis tools such as Fanpage Karma, a tool used in this research. Because of time constraints, this research did not cover other social media platforms such as Twitter, TikTok or WeChat.

Overall, the least PRC-engaged media actors were local universities offering Journalism Programs. None of these Journalism Departments have ever cooperated with PRC entities, and few of the educators approached had any knowledge of PRC influence in the Kyrgyz media sector.

Good Vibes Only: PRC-promotional Content in Kyrgyz Media

The most convenient avenue of information influence is the active spread of PRC-friendly content to promote positive views of the PRC in order to crowd out messages that are inconvenient to the PRC. This research found three main characteristics of strategies employed by the PRC: 1) inserting content within Kyrgyz media, 2) local presence of PRC media, and 3) engagement on social media. This section discusses these tactics in-depth and how they are carried out. In general, there is a cross-cutting and mutually supportive relationship between all these strategies. For example, local presence of PRC media strengthens production capacity of locally tailored PRC-friendly materials, especially when combined with direct access to local PRC entities and local elites through diplomatic channels. Such content then enjoys better distribution enabled by strong relationships with local media, who reprint them.

There are a total of 22 information platforms with high positive PRC engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic (see Table 1). The most common indicator of highly positive engagement includes a combination of receiving financial support from the PRC, signed cooperation agreements with PRC entities, consistent attendance on sponsored visits to the PRC, inserted paid-for content from PRC entities, and frequent dissemination of PRC-friendly materials.

Most of the Kyrgyz media which have engaged in a friendly manner with the PRC are state-owned, amongst the oldest media providers in the country, and are the most well-known and popular media.¹⁸ For example, Slovo Kyrgyzstana, Erkin-Too and Kyrgyz Tuusu have been in print since the 1920s, and KABAR and KTRK have been printing and broadcasting since 1930s. It is likely that these state-owned media entities, which are locally observed to be a representative voice of the government, opted for friendly presentation of and cooperation with the PRC in accordance with state foreign policy towards the PRC, which is positive. At the same time, it is also likely that these state-owned media entities were chosen as cooperative partners since they are also the most popular sources of information which provide free and wide coverage in the Kyrgyz Republic.

¹⁸ Despite these similarities, there are small differences between these media corporations in terms of the extent to which they are mouthpieces of the government. While further research is certainly needed, it has been observed that KTRK remains the media entities which most actively promotes the voices and policies of the government. By contrast, Vecherny Bishkek often promotes the views of the Russian government, as it is led by ethnic Russian editors working in the Kyrgyz Republic. Compared with KTRK, KABAR, despite being a state-owned media entity, often reports tabloid-like gossip and accidents occurring in the country. The media entities also differ in terms of the language used, with Erkin Too and Kyrgyz Tuusu published exclusively in Kyrgyz, and Vecherny Bishkek exclusively in Russian, while others are published in a mix of both.

Table 1. List of information platforms with high PRC-positive engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Name	Media type	Engagement				National distribution	
KTRK	State-owned	Received funding ¹⁹	Cooperation agreement ²⁰	Sponsored visits to PRC ²¹	Inserts ²²	Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	2 million daily (2017) ²³
KABAR	State-owned		Cooperation agreement ²⁴	Sponsored visits to the PRC ²⁵	Inserts ²⁶	Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	1000 (2019) ²⁷

¹⁹ Ilim Karypbekov, "A bref report about trip to China", [Жунго мамлекетине болгон иш сапар боюнча коомчулукка кыскача отчет], June, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__\[0\]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqwSIfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__[0]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqwSIfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R)
According to Interviewee 7, KTRK cooperates closely with the Xinjiang Television and Radio company, including the insert of paid-for content and financial aid.

²⁰ Ilim Karypbekov, "A bref report about trip to China", [Жунго мамлекетине болгон иш сапар боюнча коомчулукка кыскача отчет], June, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__\[0\]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqwSIfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__[0]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqwSIfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2CO%2CP-R)
Cholpon Urmalieva, "Cooperation between the media of Kyrgyzstan and China will continue", [Сотрудничество между СМИ Кыргызстана и Китая продолжится], Silk Road New Observer, November, 2017, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201711/91685922892.shtml>

²¹ Kabar.kg, "China hosted the Asian Media Leaders Summit", [В Китае прошел Саммит лидеров медиа Азии], April, 2018, <https://www.for.kg/news-477247-ru.html>.
China News Service, "Kyrgyz reporter: The vision of the "Belt and Road" has deepened the cooperation between the two countries" [吉尔吉斯记者：“一带一路”愿景使两国合作更加深入], June 2016, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2016/06-03/7893921.shtml>.
KTRK, "How China develops electric power", [Китай электр кубатын кантип онуктурот], November, 2019, <https://www.ktrk.kg/kg/post/34514/kg>.

²² KTRK, "Journey to China program strengthen cooperation between two countries", [«Жунго сапар» корсотуусу эки олко ортосундагы алаканы бекемдоодо], May, 2019, <http://www.ktrk.kg/index.php/kg/post/27100/kg>.
Cholpon Urmalieva, "Cooperation between the media of Kyrgyzstan and China will continue", [Сотрудничество между СМИ Кыргызстана и Китая продолжится], Silk Road New Observer, November, 2017, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201711/91685922892.shtml>

²³ Aisha Chushtuk, "The daily audience of OTRK reaches 2 million viewers", [Суточная аудитория ОТРК достигает 2 млн телезрителей], April, 2017, <https://knews.kg/2017/04/13/sutochnaya-auditoriya-otrk-dostigaet-2-mln-telezritelej/>.

²⁴ Xinhua, "Xinhua News Agency's "Window of China" column is launched on the Kyrgyz National News Agency website" [新华社“中国之窗”专栏在吉国家通讯社网站上线], May 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/19/c_1115339778.htm.
According Interviewer 36, KABAR has a cooperation agreement with Xinhua in Bishkek; Interviewee 4, with Xinjiang Television and Radio company, Silk Road Observer; Interviewee 35, Land Bridge.

²⁵ Kabar.kg, "China hosted the Asian Media Leaders Summit", [В Китае прошел Саммит лидеров медиа Азии], April, 2018, <https://www.for.kg/news-477247-ru.html>.
Nurzhan Kasmalieva, "Multifaceted China: It's better to see once than to hear a hundred times", [Многогранный Китай: Лучше один раз увидеть, чем что раз услышать], Kabar.kg, October, 2017, <https://kabar.kg/news/mnogogrannyi-kitai-luchshe-odin-raz-uvidet-chem-cto-raz-uslyshat/>
Cholponai Turdakunova, "Current state of Kyrgyz-Chinese media cooperation and ways to develop it", [Кыргыз-китай медиа кызматташтыгын бугунку кундогу абалы жана аны онуктуруу жолдору], Silk Road New Observer, December, 2018, http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201812/23224938091505_3.shtml.

²⁶ According to Interviewee 36.

²⁷ Unspecified time frame.
Promotank Research Institute, "Media influence matrix", [Матрица медиавлияния], 2019, <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Matritsa-mediavlianiya.pdf>.

ELTR	State-owned	Received funding ²⁸	Cooperation agreement ²⁹		Inserts	Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	1.19 million daily (2014) ³⁰
Piramida TV	State-owned		Cooperation agreement ³¹			Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	
Vecherny Bishkek	Private		Cooperation agreement ³²	Sponsored visits to PRC ³³		Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	Web 25000, print 40000 (2019) ³⁴
Slovo Kyrgyzstana	State-owned		Cooperation agreement ³⁵	Sponsored visits to PRC ³⁶		Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	20000 (2016) ³⁷
Kyrgyz-Tuusu	State-owned		Cooperation agreement ³⁸				20000 (2016) ³⁹
Erkin-Too	State-owned					Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	10000 (2016) ⁴⁰

²⁸ Ilim Karypbekov, “A brief report about trip to China”, [Жунго мамлекетине болгон иш сапар боюнча коомчулукка кыскача отчет], June, 2017, “[https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__\[0\]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7NytD1VRgLUfXuBA8HqW5IpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2C0%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?__cft__[0]=AZVVVPrWW3EoaiYSNqOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at7NytD1VRgLUfXuBA8HqW5IpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&__tn__=%2C0%2CP-R)”

²⁹ Xue Yuan, “Silk Road. Cultural Development” and GTRK of the Kyrgyz Republic”, [«Шелковый путь. Культурное развитие» и ГЕТРК Кыргызской Республики, Silk Road New Observer, October, 2018] <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201810/06525687061.shtml>
According to Interviewee 15, ELTR has cooperated with the Xinjiang Television and Radio company since the early 2000s. In addition, a delegation from the ELTR signed a cooperation agreement with the CCTV director during a tour in the PRC.

³⁰ Daniyar Kunafin, “Features of the TV market of Kyrgyzstan have been named”, [Названы особенности телерынка Кыргызстана], zakon.kz, August, 2020, <https://www.zakon.kz/5041927-nazvany-osobennosti-telerynka.html>.

³¹ Daniyar Kunafin, “Features of the TV market of Kyrgyzstan have been named”, [Названы особенности телерынка Кыргызстана], zakon.kz, August, 2020, <https://www.zakon.kz/5041927-nazvany-osobennosti-telerynka.html>.

³² According to Interviewee 36, Xinhua in Bishkek has signed a cooperation agreement with Vecherny Bishkek. Interviewee 2 and 11 also discussed the existence of cooperation agreements between Vecherny Bishkek and PRC media entities. In particular, Interviewee 11 shared that Vecherny Bishkek enjoys “an endless contract” with Xinhua and People’s Daily which allows mutual reprint of each other’s content.

³³ Aizhan Mambetalieva, “Xinjiang with our own eyes: Facts about “atrocities” have not been confirmed”, [Синьцзян собственными глазами: Факты о «зверствах» не подтвердились], Vecherny Bishkek, October, 2019, https://www.vb.kg/doc/382394_sinczian_sobstvennymi_glazami:_fakty_o_zverstvah_ne_podtverdilis.html

³⁴ Unspecified time frame.
Promotank Research Institute, “Media influence matrix”, [Матрица медиавлияния], 2019, <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Matritsa-mediavlianiya.pdf>.

³⁵ According to Interviewee 6, Slovo Kyrgyzstana cooperates with People’s Daily; Interviewee 36, with Xinhua.

³⁶ <https://slovo.kg/?p=108988>

³⁷ Unspecified time frame.
Central Asia Data Gathering and Analysis Team, “Print media in central Asia”, 2016, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/CADGATdatareviewno13Printmedia.pdf>.

³⁸ According Interviewee 36, Kyrgyz Tusuu cooperates with Xinhua in Bishkek; Interviewee 39, with Silk Road Observer.

³⁹ Unspecified time frame.
Central Asia Data Gathering and Analysis Team, “Print media in central Asia”, 2016, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/CADGATdatareviewno13Printmedia.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Unspecified time frame.
Central Asia Data Gathering and Analysis Team, “Print media in central Asia”, 2016, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/CADGATdatareviewno13Printmedia.pdf>.

AkiPress	Private			Sponsored visits to PRC ⁴¹		Web 15000 (2019) ⁴²
24.kg	Private			Sponsored visits to PRC ⁴³		3.9 million monthly (2019) ⁴⁴
Sanat TV	Private				Inserts ⁴⁵	
Min Kyyal FM	Private				Inserts	613,419 weekly (2012) ⁴⁶
Birinchi Radio	State-owned				Inserts	247,000 daily (2016) ⁴⁷
Kyrgyz Radiosu	State-owned				Inserts	456,131 weekly (2012) ⁴⁸
Yntymak TV	State-owned		Cooperation agreement ⁴⁹	Sponsored visits to PRC ⁵⁰		2.5 million (2017) ⁵¹
Keremet TV	Private		Cooperation agreement ⁵²	Sponsored visits to PRC ⁵³		

⁴¹ Unspecified time frame.

Promotank Research Institute, “Media influence matrix”, [Матрица медиавлияния], 2019, <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Matritsa-mediavliyaniya.pdf>.

⁴² Unspecified time frame.

Promotank Research Institute, “Media influence matrix”, [Матрица медиавлияния], 2019, <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Matritsa-mediavliyaniya.pdf>.

⁴³ Nadezhda Gorohova, “Who are you, Mr. China?”, [Кто Вы, господин Китай?], 24.kg, September, 2021, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/137640-kto-vy-gospodin-kitaj.html/>.

Nadezhda Gorohova, “My Chinese classes (part1)”, [Мои уроки китайского (часть 1)], 24.kg, September, 2012, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/137967-moi-uroki-kitajskogo-chast-1.html/>.

⁴⁴ Promotank Research Institute, “Media influence matrix”, [Матрица медиавлияния], 2019, <https://soros.kg/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Matritsa-mediavliyaniya.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Chen Xin, “Chinese language lessons is a new program of the Confucius Institute in Kyrgyzstan”, [Уроки китайского языка – новая программа Института Конфуция в Кыргызстане], Silk Road New Observer, September, 2020, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/202009/1222624779343.shtml>.

⁴⁶ Inform.kg, “Media ratings: know your place!”, [Рейтинги СМИ: знай своё место!], 2012, <http://www.inform.kg/ru/business/424>.

⁴⁷ Central Asia Data Gathering and Analysis Team, “Radio in Central Asia”, 2016, <https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/CADGATdatareviewno15Radio2016.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Inform.kg, “Media ratings: know your place!”, [Рейтинги СМИ: знай своё место!], 2012, <http://www.inform.kg/ru/business/424>.

⁴⁹ According to Interviewee 14, a cooperation agreement was signed during an official visit to the PRC in 2014.

⁵⁰ Kabar.kg, “China hosted the Asian Media Leaders Summit”, [В Китае прошел Саммит лидеров медиа Азии], April, 2018, <https://www.for.kg/news-477247-ru.html>.

⁵¹ Unspecified time frame.

Central Electoral Commission, “Information on the amount and other conditions of payment for the provision of airtime, print space of the media and the right to publish in online publications”, [Сведения о размере и других условиях оплаты за предоставление эфирного времени, печатной площади средств массовой информации и права публикации в интернет-изданиях], June, 2017, <https://shailoo.gov.kg/media/anarbek/2017/07/12/aexzbc.docx>

⁵² According to interviewee 5, a delegation from Keremet TV visited the PRC for a media summit in 2017 and signed a cooperation agreement with CCTV to rebroadcast world news programs made in the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic. Interviewee 5 also shared that Keremet TV cooperates with Xinjiang Television and Radio company.

⁵³ Kabar.kg, “China hosted the Asian Media Leaders Summit”, [В Китае прошел Саммит лидеров медиа Азии], April, 2018, <https://www.for.kg/news-477247-ru.html>.

Almaz Radio	Private			Sponsored visits to PRC ⁵⁴			190,226 weekly (2011) ⁵⁵
Xinhua	PRC		Cooperation agreement			Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	
Silk Road Observer	PRC		Cooperation agreement	Sponsored visits to PRC	Paid-to insert	Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	
Dolon TV	PRC ⁵⁶	Received funding ⁵⁷	Cooperation agreement			Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC-friendly materials	
Land Bridge	PRC	Received funding ⁵⁸	Cooperation agreement			Frequent dissemination of exclusive PRC friendly materials	

⁵⁴ Kabar.kg, “China hosted the Asian Media Leaders Summit”, [В Китае прошел Саммит лидеров медиа Азии], April, 2018, <https://www.for.kg/news-477247-ru.html>.

⁵⁵ M-Vector, “Basic research on the behaviour and perception of media audience (2011)”, [Базовое исследование поведения и восприятия медиа аудитории (2011)], 2011, http://www.media.kg/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/M-Vector_USAID_Presentation_MEDIA_arial_ru.pdf.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, “2015-2016 Catalogue of National Cultural Export Key Enterprises and Key Projects” [2015-2016年度国家文化出口重点企业和重点项目目录], http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/cyfz/202012/t20201206_918526.html
<http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/cyfz/202012/W020160518628271401565.xls>.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China, “2017-2018 Catalogue of National Cultural Export Key Enterprises and Key Projects” [2017-2018年度国家文化出口重点企业和重点项目目录], <http://images.mofcom.gov.cn/fms/201802/20180212180111623.xlsx>.

⁵⁷ According Interviewer 47, Dolon TV has signed a cooperation agreement with CCTV for free exclusive rebroadcast.

⁵⁸ Interviewee 35.

Inserting Content via Tours

Examining the 18 Kyrgyz media organisations which have high engagement with the PRC when compared to other local medias, PRC-friendly content is sustained and incorporated directly via sponsored trips and specific training programs in the PRC, and/or agreed and paid-for inserts from PRC media. It is inserted indirectly through ties with the PRC Embassy in Bishkek and membership in PRC media groups. Most of these activities started in the early 2000s after the first group of Kyrgyz journalists was invited to a media forum in 1996, with the first PRC-friendly propaganda program airing in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2004.

Based upon publicly available records and the interviews conducted, at least 40 trips and training programs have been documented (see Table 2). In the course of this research, 24 conversations with local journalists who participated in these visiting trips and specific training sessions in the PRC were conducted.⁵⁹ According to these local journalists, they received invitations from a variety of local PRC entities, such as the Embassy (Communication Department), Confucius Institutes and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁶⁰ It is likely that these are the local PRC entities responsible for on the ground management of programs centrally planned and managed by the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Council Information Office, Ministry of Commerce and the Public Diplomacy Association (See Table 2). Amongst the journalists who went on such trips to the PRC, those who held senior management positions shared that the PRC Embassy usually first sent invitations to selected media organisations and asked for a list of recommended journalists for the trips. It can also be observed that those media entities who are frequently invited to the PRC are those who already have other positive engagements with PRC entities.

Table 2. List of Tours and Trainings attended by Kyrgyz Media Entities in the PRC.

Type	Kyrgyz Media	Date	PRC Partner
China Tour	Silk Road Observer ⁶¹	January 2020	
Xinjiang Tour	KTRK ⁶²	December 2019	
Xinjiang Tour	KTRK ⁶³	November 2019	
Xinjiang Tour	Vecherny Bishkek ⁶⁴	October 2019	
Training	State Media Service ⁶⁵	September 2019	
Training	KTRK ⁶⁶	September 2019	
Training	ELTR ⁶⁷	September 2019	
Xinjiang Tour	Slovo Kyrgyzstana ⁶⁸	July 2019	

⁵⁹ Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 29, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 46, 47, 50, 52, 70.

⁶⁰ Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 29, 37, 50.

⁶¹ Sergey Ivanov, "From Bishkek to Zhuhai", [От Бишкека до Чжухая], Silk Road New Observer, January, 2020, <http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1653/202001/567196550187838486.shtml>.

⁶² Interviewee 9.

⁶³ KTRK, "How China develops electric power", [Кытай электр кубатын кантип онуктурот], November, 2019, <https://www.ktrk.kg/kg/post/34514/kg>.

⁶⁴ Aizhan Mambetalieva, "Xinjiang with our own eyes: Facts about "atrocities" have not been confirmed", [Синьцзян собственными глазами: Факты о «зверствах» не подтвердились], Vecherny Bishkek, October, 2019, https://www.vb.kg/doc/382394_sinczian_sobstvennymi_glazami_fakty_o_zverstvah_ne_podtverdilis.html.

⁶⁵ Interviewee 10.

⁶⁶ Interviewee 10.

⁶⁷ Interviewee 10.

⁶⁸ Slovo.kg, <https://slovo.kg/?p=108988>.

Media Forum	Vecherny Bishkek ⁶⁹	2019	
China Tour	Slovo Kyrgyzstana ⁷⁰	2019	
China Tour	Silk Road Observer ⁷¹	2019	
China Tour	State Media Service ⁷²	2019	
China Tour	Government Press ⁷³	2019	
China Tour	ELTR ⁷⁴	2019	
China Tour	KTRK ⁷⁵	2019	
Training	Unknown journalist ⁷⁶	Septemebr 2018	Ministry of Commerce
Training	Ala-Too 24 (KTRK) ⁷⁷	August 2018	Ministry of Commerce
Training	Akipress ⁷⁸	July 2018	State Council Information Office
Xinjiang Tour	Akipress ⁷⁹	July 2018	State Council Information Office
Xinjiang Tour	Akipress ⁸⁰	April 2018	
Training	Unknown journalist ⁸¹	April 2018	China Public Diplomacy Association
Training	Dolon TV ⁸²	2018	
Media Forum	Keremet TV ⁸³	2018	
China Tour	KABAR ⁸⁴	October 2017	State Council Information Office
Media Forum	Keremet TV ⁸⁵	2017	
Xinjiang Tour	KTRK ⁸⁶	June 2016	State Council Information Office

⁶⁹ Interviewee 11.

⁷⁰ Interviewee 6.

⁷¹ Interviewee 39.

⁷² Interviewee 10.

⁷³ Interviewee 10.

⁷⁴ Interviewee 10.

⁷⁵ Interviewee 10.

⁷⁶ China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, "Completion of the seminar for the heads of the International Department of the SCO National Key Media" [上合组织国家重点媒体国际部负责人研修班结业], September 2018, http://www.cipg.org.cn/m/2018-09/30/content_40808271.html.

⁷⁷ Interviewee 7.

⁷⁸ Xinhua, "Silk Road Economic Belt Countries' Media Representatives Gather in Beijing for Study and Exchange" [丝绸之路经济带相关国家媒体负责人齐聚北京考察交流], July 2018, http://m.xinhuanet.com/culture/2018-07/28/c_1123188640.htm.

⁷⁹ Xinjiang Daily, "Seminar for media leaders from countries related to the Silk Road Economic Belt opens" [丝绸之路经济带相关国家媒体负责人研修班开班], July 2018, <http://news.ts.cn/system/2018/07/22/035305225.shtml>.
Information Office, State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Media people from 18 countries entered Xinjiang to taste the achievements of the "Belt and Road" construction" [18国媒体人士走进新疆品味 "一带一路" 建设成果], July 2018, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/31773/35507/35510/35524/Document/1634687/1634687.htm>.
People's Daily, "Perceive the vivid and real China" [感知生动真实的中国], July 2018, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2018-07-28/doc-ihfxszf6503306.shtml>

⁸⁰ <https://slovo.kg/?p=108988>.

⁸¹ People's Daily, "Journalists from SCO countries come to China for training" [上海合作组织国家记者来华培训], April 2018, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0404/c1002-29906180.html>.

⁸² Interviewee 49.

⁸³ Interviewee 5.

⁸⁴ Nurzhan Kasmalieva, "Multifaceted China: It's better to see once than to hear a hundred times", [Многогранный Китай: Лучше один раз увидеть, чем сто раз услышать], Kabar.kg, October, 2017, <https://kabar.kg/news/mnogogrannui-kitai-luchshe-odin-raz-uvidet-chem-sto-raz-uslyshat/>
Cholponai Turdakunova, "Current state of Kyrgyz-Chinese media cooperation and ways to develop it", [Кыргыз-кытай медиа кызматташтыгын бугунку кундогу абалы жана аны онуктуруу жолдору], Silk Road New Observer, December, 2018, http://ru.siluxgc.com/html/R1413/201812/23224938091505_3.shtml.

⁸⁵ Interviewee 18.

⁸⁶ China News Service, "Kyrgyz reporter: The vision of the "Belt and Road" has deepened the cooperation between the two countries" [吉尔吉斯记者: "一带一路" 愿景使两国合作更加深入], June 2016, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2016/06-03/7893921.shtml>.

Training	Unknown journalist ⁸⁷	June 2015	Ministry of Commerce
Training	KABAR ⁸⁸	2015	
China Tour	Silk Road Observer ⁸⁹	2015	
China Tour	Akipress ⁹⁰	2015	
China Tour	Yntymak TV ⁹¹	2014	
China Tour	Osh TV ⁹²	2014	
China Tour	Osh Pirim ⁹³	2014	
China Tour	Akipress ⁹⁴	2014	
Training	KTRK ⁹⁵	2014	
Xinjiang Tour	24.kg ⁹⁶	September 2012	State Council Information Office
Training	Unknown journalist ⁹⁷	July 2012	State Council Information Office
Training	Unknown journalist ⁹⁸	May 2012	State Council Information Office
Training	KABAR ⁹⁹	2011	
Media Forum	KABAR ¹⁰⁰	2008	
Training	KTRK ¹⁰¹	2008	
Media Forum	Vecherny Bishkek ¹⁰²	2007	
Training	KTRK ¹⁰³	2005	
China Tour	KTRK ¹⁰⁴	1996	
China Tour	Vecherny Bishkek ¹⁰⁵	1996	
China Tour	Slovo Kyrgyzstana ¹⁰⁶	1996	

Depending on the organiser, these visiting trips are either general trips or tailored for the Kyrgyz audience. General trips are usually conducted in the Central and Eastern regions of the PRC and consist of visits to teahouses, museums and companies to showcase Chinese culture, history and economic growth. The tailored trips on the other hand are focused on showcasing peaceful ethnic

⁸⁷ Xinhua, “Seminar for Economic and Trade Journalists from ASEAN Countries Held in Nanning” [东盟国家经贸记者研修班在南宁举办], June 2016, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/0602/c157278-27092753.html>.

⁸⁸ Interviewee 36.

⁸⁹ Interviewee 37.

⁹⁰ Interviewee 16.

⁹¹ Interviewee 14.

⁹² Interviewee 14, 13.

⁹³ Interviewee 14.

⁹⁴ Interviewee 14.

⁹⁵ Interviewee 8.

⁹⁶ Nadezhda Gorohova, “Who are you, Mr. China?”, [Кто Вы, господин Китай?], 24.kg, September, 2021, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/137640-kto-vy-gospodin-kitaj.html/>.

Nadezhda Gorohova, “My Chinese classes (part 1)”, [Мои уроки китайского (часть 1)], 24.kg, September, 2012, <https://24.kg/archive/ru/community/137967-moi-uroki-kitajskogo-chast-1.html/>

⁹⁷ Global Times, “Deputy Director Wang Guoqing meets with the trainees of news media from neighboring countries in Xinjiang” [王国庆副主任会见新疆周边国家新闻媒体研修学员], July 2012, <https://china.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJw455>.

⁹⁸ Svetlana Moiseeva, “Journalists of Kyrgyzstan will go to China for advanced training”, [Журналисты Кыргызстана отправятся в Китай для повышения квалификации], Vecherny Bishkek, May, 2012, https://www.vb.kg/doc/188279_jyurnalisty_kyrgyzstana_otpraviatsia_v_kitay_dlia_povysheniia_kvalifikacii.html.

⁹⁹ Interviewee 36.

¹⁰⁰ Interviewee 5.

¹⁰¹ Interviewee 8.

¹⁰² Interviewee 52.

¹⁰³ Interviewee 8.

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee 29.

¹⁰⁵ Interviewee 29.

¹⁰⁶ Interviewee 29.

harmony in Xinjiang and the good quality of the lives of Muslims in the PRC. Some Interviewees recalled the following experiences:

- ▶ Interviewee 16, “Every time we went to each city, we were met by Muslims who practiced Islam, they tried to show us the many ways that Muslims are living in good condition and have opportunities to thrive in China:”
- ▶ Interviewee 36, “They took us to a Kazakh village, we heard in Xinjiang the Muslim people are suppressed, but we saw them living in freedom and having a quiet life, the villagers told us they thank the Chinese government. In each of Kazakh house there is a photo of Xi Jinping hanging on the wall, just like in Kyrgyzstan when we used to hang Lenin’s photo during the USSR.”

At least 10 local journalists reported awareness of these tours as propaganda efforts to showcase, one-sidedly, the best aspects of the PRC. Despite this soberness, they also explained that they were impressed nonetheless by what they were shown.¹⁰⁷

In general, local journalists were not paid additionally by the Chinese side to attend these trips. This is compared to the specific training programs, which are usually longer in duration. According to Interviewee 37, who attended a one-month training program in Xinjiang, each trainee received a stipend totalling 20,000 Kyrgyz som (roughly \$240). As recalled by Interviewee 37, the training was conducted by representatives of the China News Service and included political subjects such as the political and economic situation of the PRC in the world. Beyond topics about the PRC, trainings also covered journalistic norms and skills. As recalled by Interviewee 36 and 70, the training program included sessions on the expected behaviour of journalists during conflicts and protests, speech techniques, technical distribution development, and equipment. This is unlike visiting trips which usually focus on providing an introduction to Chinese culture and history.

As a rule, local journalists were not obligated by the PRC to write about their experiences while visiting. However, Interviewee 4 explained that, upon delivering their recommendations to the Chinese for who should receive invitations, the local media management itself expects their staff to publish content during and/or after the trip. For the local journalists as well, according to Interviewees 2, 7 and 16, these all expenses paid trips to the PRC are appealing experiences as they provide unique opportunities to cover new materials which would be otherwise impossible due to resource-scarcity in the Kyrgyz media sector. In some cases, as recalled by Interviewee 8, the tours programmed in time for creative writing and participants were provided with cameras, operators, editing tables and more to create materials. As recalled by Interviewee 18, some sessions of the trip were designated for content brainstorming and the sharing of ideas to make content about bilateral affairs interesting. Despite the absence of a strict condition to publish materials from trips to the PRC, it can be observed that most Kyrgyz journalists who participated in these visiting trips and specific trainings published on materials learned from the PRC instructors during or after their trips. Most commonly, Kyrgyz journalists published diary-style impressions of the PRC, such as those covering visits to factories.

Inserting Content via Reprint

Another direct way of inserting content is through cooperation agreements that have Kyrgyz media organisations reprint PRC produced content. At least 9 Kyrgyz media entities have signed cooperation agreements with PRC entities (see Table 1). These cooperation agreements date back to the early 2000s. The scope of these agreements varies, from allowing Kyrgyz media organisations to freely reprinting published content as they see fit, committing to regularly publishing PRC-made

¹⁰⁷ Interviewees 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 13, 14 16, 17.

domestic and world news, jointly producing specific content, including specific paid-for content in their reporting, and more. While not all of these agreements are transparent about obligations from the Kyrgyz side, it can be observed that, unlike those who have not maintained such agreements, those Kyrgyz media organisations who have signed cooperative agreements with PRC entities tend to frequently publish PRC-friendly content, promote various success stories on the economy and cultural preservation, and routinely publish interviews with and/or opinion articles by the PRC Ambassador in Bishkek.

According to the few publicly available records about these cooperation agreements, KTRK is amongst the leading local media organisations to have consistently received PRC funding to insert PRC made programs. The oldest paid-for inserted content, and that preliminarily observed to be most successful so far, is the Jungogo Sapar (Жунго сапар) program, which directly translates into “Journey to China.” The Jungogo Sapar show has been broadcast daily on KTRK’s leading channel, ranging in length from 30 to 45 minutes since 2004.¹⁰⁸ Jungogo Sapar is a program focused on the latest news, and the cultural and commercial development of Xinjiang. It is produced by ethnic Kyrgyz from Xinjiang who work for the Xinjiang Television and Radio company. Based on preliminary observations, the show presents a significant divide between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities, in that Han Chinese are always the face of commercial and political developments in Xinjiang, whereas ethnic minorities are portrayed to be experts in preserving cultural practices such as wool making, woodcraft and so on. The show serves to create a significant sentiment that Xinjiang is populated and led by Han Chinese, a narrative that the Chinese Communist Party sought to create to reverse Soviet memories of the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic. A similar program, Kitai Terezesi (Окно в Китай) has been broadcast on Birinchi radio and Kyrgyz radios, as well as Jaidarman (Жайдарман) on the Min Kiyal FM radio.

According to Interviewee 20, a former senior management official at KTRK who was part of negotiations with the PRC side in the early 2000s, “Jungogo Sapar is made in China especially for Central Asian countries, with different editorial offices for Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and so on, the show is available both as a TV program and radio show, and employs about 20 to 40 people at the time [in the PRC]”. Interviewee 20 added that the Kyrgyz side in the early years agreed to broadcast Jungogo Sapar out of commercial need. The funds obtained by the Kyrgyz side were much needed financial support for increasing salaries and buying equipment to sustain production at a time when the state media sector was fragile and underfunded after independence from the Soviet Union. Likewise, ELTR, has also enjoyed on-and-off cooperation agreements for the broadcast of Jungogo Sapar since the early 2000s. An ELTR senior management official, Interviewee 15, recalled that the Chinese funding came at a crucial time when the company was struggling to pay salaries and cover the pension fund for its employees.

The price for inserting content varies depending on the type and format. According to the former Director of KTRK in a Facebook post, the media organisation received \$700,000 in funding from the PRC between 2017 to 2020 for broadcasting Jungogo Sapar daily, as well as the analogue version on its radio station.¹⁰⁹ According to Interviewee 20, a former senior management official at KTRK who was also aware of the deal, the Chinese funding equated to one third of the media’s annual budget in the 2000s. Since then, KTRK’s budget has expanded. In 2021, the General Director reported its annual budget to be \$4 million.¹¹⁰ Another Interviewee who worked for ELTR, another state-owned media organisation which also broadcasts Jungogo Sapar, had reviewed a contract under which the PRC side paid 12 to 15 million Kyrgyz som (roughly \$140,000 to \$180,000) per

¹⁰⁸ While some interviewees reported having seen the show on KTRK even before 2004, open-source information described the cooperation agreement on Jungogo Sapar to have started in 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Ilim Karypbekov, “A brief report about trip to China”, [Жунго мамлекетине болгон иш сапар боюнча коомчулукка кыскача отчет], June, 2017, [https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?_cft__\[Q\]=AZVVPrWW3EoaiYSNgOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at-7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqW5IfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&_tn_=%2C0%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/ilim.karypbekov/posts/10154634069153016?_cft__[Q]=AZVVPrWW3EoaiYSNgOMowi4v51WPhYfcxq3hcZphYm5KKW4Lnz8mCoZ23BMWp2nfpS66atWtIM89IeQ8at-7Nytd1VRgLUFXuBA8HqW5IfpcRvBnOxgK_VIeukrcRM-lXo&_tn_=%2C0%2CP-R).

¹¹⁰ Aida Zhumashova, “OTRK receives 371 million som from the state budget annually”, [Ежегодно ОТРК получает 371 миллион сомов из республиканского бюджета], September, 2021, https://24.kg/vlast/206415_ejagodno_otrk_poluchaet_371_million_somov_izrespublikanskogo_byudjeta/.

year to the organisation between the early 2000s and 2018 to broadcast Jungogo Sapar twice a day, five times a week, for one hour each time.¹¹¹

Apart from Jungogo Sapar, Kyrgyz media organisations also receive pay-to-publish articles. Some Kyrgyz media entities, such as KABAR and Vecherny Bishkek, have at various times hosted an entire section called “China Window” or “A Lens into the Middle Kingdom” on their websites and in printed newspapers.¹¹² The PRC entities who create and manage content inserts are PRC media organisations who have a degree of presence in the Kyrgyz Republic, such as Xinhua, the Silk Road Observer, Dolon TV, Land Bridge, Xinjiang Television, CCTV, CTTN, and the People’s Daily. According to several interviews with former and current local employees of these PRC media entities, it is regular practice that Kyrgyz media organisations receive funding to publish certain articles written by the PRC media.¹¹³ Interviewees added that one page of inserted content in a state newspaper costs about 25,000 Kyrgyz som (roughly \$300), observing that the most popular state-owned newspapers in the Kyrgyz Republic publish at least 2-3 pages per month. These interviewees shared that the Kyrgyz side are not allowed by agreement to edit such paid-for inserted content.

While some articles are reprints of translated official statements and news, which include citations of the PRC media who authored the article, others are specific articles about aspects of Kyrgyz-Chinese relations that are written by PRC media organisations based in the Kyrgyz Republic. Audiences are able to distinguish paid for articles from regular content if citation of the PRC media is mentioned, or in some cases, when Chinese editor’s lack of local knowledge resulted in unfashionable content and vocabulary compared with that used in today’s post-Soviet Russian and Kyrgyz. For example, the entire Jungogo Sapar show is presented in pre-Sovietised Kyrgyz language with a mix of Chinese vocabulary, including some old-fashion vocabulary which is no longer used by the Kyrgyz population in the Kyrgyz Republic. The audience is thus immediately able to tell that this is a show produced by ethnic Kyrgyz in the PRC. While some find this fascinating as a way to learn pre-Soviet Kyrgyz, especially among some of the population who rejects Russian influence, most find the unfamiliar vocabulary irritating and too attention-demanding to follow.

Inserting Content & the Role of PRC Entities

The PRC Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic is the most important actor in planning and coordinating PRC-friendly content. Firstly, the Embassy provides direct and indirect support to some Kyrgyz media organisations. According to Interviewees 3, 4 and 6, the PRC Embassy provides various funding and technical support opportunities, such as paying for printing services or gifting computers, printers and air conditioners. According to Interviewees 3 and 4, the PRC Embassy acts as a mediator, initiating, connecting and facilitating cooperation between the Kyrgyz media and PRC media. According to Interviewee 9, local staff at CCTV work from offices within the PRC Embassy. Interviewee 4 explicitly referred to the Embassy as a client, noted “The Chinese Embassy is our client, they initiated the translation of Chinese TV programs into Kyrgyz language.”

The Embassy hosts several annual events, as well as pre-departure and post-trip receptions for those local journalists who attend general tours and training programs in the PRC.¹¹⁴ Less formally, Interviewee 17, shared that a verbal agreement was reached with the Consulate in Osh to exchange free trips to the PRC in exchange for broadcasting PRC programs. Five local journalists indicated that they enjoy free consultations with the press office of the PRC embassy if they are

¹¹¹ Interviewee 12.

¹¹² Interviewees 2, 5, 11.
China News Service, “Interview with the President of Kyrgyzstan National News Agency: Covering China and connecting the two peoples” [访吉国家通讯社社长: 报道中国 让两国民心相通], July 2017, <https://news.sina.cn/2017-07-21/detail-ifyihrwk1711688.d.html?from=wap>.

¹¹³ Interviewees 6, 20, 28, 37, 42.

¹¹⁴ Interviewees 13, 14, 16.

writing anything about China and its policy.¹¹⁵ However, it is likely that only those who write PRC-friendly materials enjoy these privileges. According to Interviewee 8, “Only the best journalists who cover China well,” according to judgement of the PRC, are frequently invited to events hosted at the PRC Embassy. The Embassy also started a prize competition for China-Kyrgyzstan friendly reporting (中吉友好新闻奖) in 2014. According to Interviewee 8, who has close knowledge of this competition, one Kyrgyz journalist who won this prize in 2014 received a promotion at a popular newspaper soon after, a special role dedicated to editorial work concerning PRC affairs.¹¹⁶

The Embassy’s outreach efforts in the Kyrgyz media sector have one clear purpose. According to Interviewees 3, 4 and 5, the PRC Embassy is concerned with how local medias report on Xinjiang and has reached out several times offering “accurate information.” As recalled by Interviewee 4, “The Chinese side asked us not to write about it, they said there are no issues in Xinjiang.” In one extreme case shared by Interviewee 3, a PRC Embassy officer offered equipment and financial support to a local media in exchange for managing Xinjiang narratives’ “They said if we write about Uyghurs, we should consult with them.” These cooperation agreements that the Embassy has helped establish are crucial. At least 5 interviewees explained the lack of reporting on Xinjiang issues as due to fear of spoiling cooperation.¹¹⁷ This was explained clearly by Interviewee 70; “In order not to violate this friendship and cooperation agreement, we will not dig into sensitive topics [for PRC].” Others attribute the lack of reporting to Kyrgyz state policy on the issue, as state media have to follow the official thought on the PRC’s Xinjiang policy.¹¹⁸ By facilitating consensus with the Kyrgyz government, the Embassy’s choice of media partners in the country ensures that discussion on the issue of Xinjiang is tightly controlled across the border.

Apart from the influence of the PRC Embassy on local, there is also local presence of PRC media. According to a list published by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2022, there are three media entities from the PRC registered in the Kyrgyz Republic as a foreign media. These are Xinhua, Wen Wei Po and the Silk Road Observer.¹¹⁹ There are also two other PRC media entities, Dolon TV and Land Bridge, who work locally as private media without registration as a foreign media. Dolon TV is a locally registered media company with foreign capital participation and a Chinese national director, Zhang Sulan, who has frequently been featured in PRC magazines dedicated to affairs of the Chinese diaspora.¹²⁰ On the other hand, Land Bridge is not a locally registered media in the Kyrgyz Republic but is self-described to be a printed magazine operating from Urumqi, Xinjiang, with a number of local Kyrgyz staff who work to contribute content and distribute the magazine in the Kyrgyz Republic. Some PRC media entities such as the China News Service and CGTN hire local journalists as part time reporters.

According to 20 interviews conducted with former and current employees of these PRC media entities in the Kyrgyz Republic, the number of full-time staff, both local and PRC nation, is roughly five at Xinhua, ten at the Silk Road Observer, twenty at Dolon TV and two at Land Bridge.¹²¹ There are also several local staff who work part-time on a short term, contractual basis. Salary for local staff reportedly ranged from \$100 to \$1000 depending on the role and experience, with content

¹¹⁵ Interviewees 3, 4, 5, 9, 11.

¹¹⁶ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kyrgyz Republic, “The Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan held the awarding ceremony of the first “China-Kyrgyzstan Friendship News Award”” [驻吉尔吉斯斯坦使馆举办首届“中吉友好新闻奖”颁奖仪式], February 2015, http://kg.china-embassy.org/dssghd/201502/t20150205_1311404.htm.

¹¹⁷ Interviewees 4, 5, 8, 20, 70.

¹¹⁸ Interviewees 2, 12, 62, 64, 72.

¹¹⁹ 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>.

¹²⁰ Osoo.kg, “Dolon TV Limited Liability Company is an organization with foreign participation”, [Общество с ограниченной ответственностью «Долон ТВ» – Организация с иностранным участием], June, 2022, <https://www.osoo.kg/inn/00611200210096/>. Qiu Web, “Zhang Sulan, Director of Delong TV in Kyrgyzstan: From Science to Liberal Arts” [吉尔吉斯斯坦德隆电视台台长张素兰:从理科到文科], July 2014, <http://www.chinaqw.com/hqhr/2014/07-04/8926.shtml>.

¹²¹ Interviewees 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 55.

creators often paid per piece. While there are two PRC nationals registered as a foreign accredited journalists working for Wen Wei Po in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2022, this research failed to capture their local activities. As a group, these PRC medias are one of a kind locally, completely different from all other medias in the Kyrgyz Republic.¹²²

PRC MEDIA ENTITIES OPERATING IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Xinhua is a leading PRC state media organisation widely regarded to have the largest global distribution from among these, as well as the highest number of foreign correspondents and offices overseas. The Xinhua Bishkek office opened in 2009. According to a former local employee, PRC managers are dispatched to and stationed at the Bishkek office for a 3 to 4-year term. In the beginning, and for over 10 years, the Xinhua Bishkek office was based within a local state-owned media organisation, before moving to a hotel office. To ensure accurate reporting to Beijing and access to information, the Xinhua Bishkek office maintains employment of a local journalist with active simultaneous employment in a leading state-owned media entity. Furthermore, according to a former employee, the Xinhua Bishkek office holds an active cooperation agreement with several local media entities such as Slovo Kyrgyzstana, Kabar, Kyrgyz-Tuusuu, Vecherny Bishkek, Mosovskii Komsomolets and Kut Bilim. The office receives press release instructions from the PRC Embassy in Bishkek. Xinhua is not available in Kyrgyz language, its Russian language online presence, serving all Russian-speaking countries, as of June 2022 had 12666 followers on Facebook.¹²³

The Silk Road Observer (развитие на Среднеазиатском шелковом пути /丝路新观察) opened in 2015. A leading local media organisation, KABAR, helped to host the paper's one year anniversary.¹²⁴ Like Xinhua, according to one former employee, the Silk Road Observer was based at and worked out of the office of a state-owned media organisation.¹²⁵ The first Director of the Silk Road Observer was reportedly simultaneously employed as the Director of the Xinhua office in Urumqi. Another former employee added that management of the Silk Road Observer was also overseen by the China News Service. The Silk Road Observer publishes around one to two articles online daily concerning the PRC, and roughly 20 articles weekly in a printed newspaper with a circulation of around 20,000 pre-pandemic in Chinese, Russian and Kyrgyz languages. Its local social media presence as of June 2022 was 3730 followers on Facebook and 88,200 on Instagram.¹²⁶

Dolon TV (Долон ТВ / 德隆电视台) opened in 2005. It started as a private enterprise by a PRC national aimed at providing Chinese programs to PRC migrants living in the Kyrgyz Republic.¹²⁷ From 2015 to 2018, Dolon TV became a PRC government subsidised project under the National Cultural Export Key Project Catalogue funded by the Ministry of Culture.¹²⁸ According to Interviewee 48, a former employee, the majority of Dolon TV's audience is now Kyrgyz pensioners who pay 250 Kyrgyz som (roughly \$3) for 170 local and international channels. Dolon TV has free exclusive rebroadcast rights to at least 10 PRC channels from CCTV. It also produces an original show about the PRC's cultural and economic projects in the Kyrgyz Republic and airs Russian language dubbed PRC films

¹²² See discussion section below for effectiveness.

¹²³ Xinhua news Russia page on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/xinhuanewsruussia/>.

¹²⁴ People's Daily, "Kyrgyzstan's "Silk Road New Observer" newspaper held an anniversary celebration" [吉尔吉斯斯坦《丝路新观察》报举办周年庆典], November 2016, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1125/c1002-28895431.html>.

¹²⁵ This state media organisation is different from the one Xinhua's Bishkek office was based at.

¹²⁶ The Silk Road New Observer Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/siluxgc.kg/>. The Silk Road New Observer Instagram page https://www.instagram.com/shelkovui_put/.

¹²⁷ Xinhua, "Chinese TV conquers Kyrgyz audience" [中国电视征服吉尔吉斯斯坦观众], July 2014, <https://5g.dahe.cn/news/20140704103104640>.

¹²⁸ Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, "2015-2016 Catalogue of National Cultural Export Key Enterprises and Key Projects" [2015-2016年度国家文化出口重点企业和重点项目目录], http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxgkml/cygz/202012/t20201206_918526.html. <http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxgkml/cygz/202012/W020160518628271401565.xls>. Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, "2017-2018 Catalogue of National Cultural Export Key Enterprises and Key Projects" [2017-2018年度国家文化出口重点企业和重点项目目录], <http://images.mofcom.gov.cn/fms/201802/20180212180111623.xlsx>.

and TV shows. Its local social media presence as of June 2022 is 963 followers on Facebook and 138 on Instagram.¹²⁹

Land Bridge (Контимосм/大陆桥) is a PRC magazine established during the Soviet Union devoted to highlighting the success stories of Sino-USSR relations. Under Soviet rule, Land Bridge was distributed by a small number of PRC representatives in Kirgiziya (the Soviet name for what is now Kyrgyzstan) to local elites in order to broaden Sino-USSR friendship.¹³⁰ Since Kyrgyz independence, the Land Bridge magazine has continued to print in newspaper style, upgrading to high quality coloured paper in the 2010s. Today, the magazine remains one of its kind in the Kyrgyz Republic. When compared to local free magazines, Land Bridge is printed on expensive quality shiny paper with each page accompanied by colourful pictures. The 60-page magazine is physically published monthly in Urumqi, 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. Each month, 5000 free magazine copies are shipped from Urumqi to Bishkek for national distribution. It has no online and/or digital presence.

These PRC media entities serve several key roles for the PRC both in terms of domestic purposes and information operations in the Kyrgyz Republic. First, they continuously produce and distribute PRC-friendly content which are fed by on the ground trends and events. It can be observed that all content published by these PRC media organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic are materials highlighting positive aspects of PRC developments and Chinese-Kyrgyz relations. As evident by frequent attendance at official events and the ability to conduct of interviews, the PRC media entities have sustained positive, collaborative working relationships with the local government in the production and dissemination of information. Such content is disseminated to the public mainly through inserted content in Kyrgyz media products and via a small contingent of local audience interested in the PRC.

Second, the information collected from the Kyrgyz Republic is used for both domestic propaganda purposes as well as similar purposes abroad. One of the most prominent examples of this is the repeated airing of interviews with local elites where PRC successes are praised, which speaks to domestic PRC citizens and foreigners about the good governance of the PRC abroad. Borrowing voices of local elites is a key practice, as most of the PRC-positive materials available in the Kyrgyz Republic tend to feature voices of local elites. In some cases, it is also witnessed that some local elites are featured on PRC state media praising PRC policies without ever having these articles published in local media.

According to three Interviewees who worked for PRC media entities in the Kyrgyz Republic, there is additional pay for employees who successfully carry out an approved interview with local elites.¹³¹ The fixed price is about 10,000 Kyrgyz som (roughly \$120) for one interview with a Minister and 20,000 for one with a higher-ranked official. Voices from PRC entities are also used, with the Chinese managers responsible for seeking agreement from the Chinese side to cover their operation, then sending a local journalist to conduct the interview.

In addition to creating material to be broadcast for public consumption, there was evidence

¹²⁹ Dolon TV Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100009134971016>.
Dolon TV Instagram page <https://www.instagram.com/dolontv.kg/>.

¹³⁰ According to Interviewee 35, this magazine also operates in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, with a slightly different, localised name, covering stories between China-Kazakhstan and China-Tajikistan. The magazine failed to obtain entry into Uzbekistan under the Karimov regime but has revived negotiations under Mirziyoyev. The author was able to obtain copies of these magazines in Almaty and Dushanbe during field visits.

¹³¹ Interviewees 38, 42, 53.

that local Kyrgyz employees of PRC media entities are used for private reports.¹³² A number of local employees who worked for PRC media entities have expressed that they were tasked with conducting research on topics which was never published, for example on public health statistics of Kyrgyz children, lives of Chinese migrants in Kyrgyzstan, the political situation in Central Asia, and cooperation between the United States and Kyrgyzstan.¹³³

Third, these PRC media entities are effectively middlemen between PRC entities working in the Kyrgyz Republic and local media organisations. At least three local journalists who worked for PRC media shared that the Chinese managers focus heavily on creating material about Chinese commercial projects in the Kyrgyz Republic and how these contribute to the local economy as champions of bilateral friendship.¹³⁴ PRC media also promotes the charity work done by these PRC companies, events hosted by Confucius Institutes in schools, and success stories of scholarship students sponsored by the Embassy. As explained by five local journalists who worked for a PRC media organisation in the Kyrgyz Republic and were interviewed by this study, these articles are reprinted and publication by local media is paid for as part of cooperation agreements.¹³⁵ Interviewee 37 added that some of the articles written by PRC media in the Kyrgyz Republic were never published on their own platforms, but published by other local media instead. Several local journalists who worked for Kyrgyz media entities shared that they frequently obtained articles from PRC media organisations, mainly from the Silk Road Observer.¹³⁶

Fourth, the local presence of PRC media, feeding PRC-friendly content to Kyrgyz media, ensures a maximum degree of editorial censorship and narrative dissemination. All of the local employees who worked for a PRC media organisation who were interviewed described the extensive censorship intervention conducted by Chinese managers on a daily basis. When conducting local interviews for an article, all interview questions had to be approved and edited beforehand. All reported that these PRC media organisations have asked the local staff not to report on any domestic Kyrgyz topics which reflect a negative narrative towards Chinese-Kyrgyz relations or contribute to a poor image of the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic. Chinese editors go as far as forbidding local staff from writing about controversial domestic Kyrgyz politics, warning that they are considered journalists of PRC media and that their voices could harm Chinese-Kyrgyz relations. Even when content is sent to Kyrgyz media for reprint, the PRC media organisations insist on the right of final review to ensure there are no changes in the content.

In addition to PRC entities which are working in the Kyrgyz Republic, Kyrgyz media are also being incorporated into multilateral cooperations as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Dozens of media alliances and groups named after the BRI have been created since the BRI's announcement in 2013, and those Kyrgyz media organisations who already have extensive cooperation agreements with the PRC quickly became members of these alliances and groups. In October 2016, Piramida TV reportedly became a member of the Silk Road Satellite TV Alliance.¹³⁷ A senior staff member at KABAR shared that the media organisation has joined as a member of the Belt and Road Media News Society.¹³⁸ In 2019, Slovo Kyrgyzstan became a member of the BRI Media Community.¹³⁹ In April 2018, some Kyrgyz media organisations were amongst the 59 foreign media entities from 32 countries to sign the first declaration to create the Belt and Road News Network.¹⁴⁰ While it is not known to the public what is expected of the foreign media who have joined these BRI media

¹³² Interviewees 36, 37, 44.

¹³³ Interviewees 36, 37, 44.

¹³⁴ Interviewees 37, 39, 41.

¹³⁵ Interviewees 28, 33, 37, 42, 43.

¹³⁶ Interviewees 6, 37, 28, 42.

¹³⁷ World Chinese Media, "Kyrgyzstan Dolon TV: Telling Chinese Stories in Kyrgyzstan" [吉尔吉斯斯坦德隆电视台: 在吉尔吉斯斯坦讲好中国故事], November 2016, <https://www.worldchinesemedia.com/2016/11/21/517/>.

¹³⁸ Interviewee 4.

¹³⁹ Interviewee 6.

¹⁴⁰ Xinhua, "Chinese and foreign media published joint efforts to promote the "Belt and Road Initiative" "Road" Declaration of the Construction of the News Cooperation Alliance" [中外媒体发表共同推进 "一带一路" 新闻合作联盟建设的宣言], April 2018, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-04/09/content_5281133.htm.

groups, as they are still in their early years of development, it is expected that various cooperation agreements will grow. For example, after joining such a BRI media group, participating media from the Kyrgyz Republic, such as Vecherny Bishkek, were brought to media training programs funded by the State Information Office in the name of BRI.¹⁴¹ Interviewee 6 also shared that one trip to the PRC was organized under the framework of BRI Media Community, where media members shared experiences of promoting the BRI in the host countries and exchanged ideas in this direction.

Inserting Content on Social Media

Due to the decline in popularity of print media and radio, together with raising internet accessibility via mobile phones in the Kyrgyz Republic, national media consumption habits are rapidly changing. At the same time, social media has become the latest addition to PRC information operations. In general, representation of the PRC on Kyrgyz social media is observably positive, no matter if PRC cooperation is present or not.

This study found that PRC-friendly content is promoted online through multiple ways. First, amongst the local media identified by this research to have existing cooperation agreements with PRC entities, all are developing social media presence. These vary in terms of distribution platform, content language, type of content, frequency of publication online and engagement level. Even amongst local media who were not found to have active cooperation with the PRC, larger segments of their audiences interacted with positive content on the PRC than negative content. Second, there are dozens of PRC social media influencers and pages who operate in the Russian language, and some have placed ads targeting audience in the Kyrgyz Republic. Lastly, there are some specific online personality influencers, pages, and groups which specifically push positive PRC content in the Kyrgyz Republic in both Russian and Kyrgyz languages.

Amongst local media which have existing cooperation with the PRC, six have been observed to have the most active online presence. However, it is important to keep in mind that their online popularity is limited when compared to Kyrgyz independent medias such as Azattyk and Kaktus.

Table 3. Social media presence of local medias with PRC cooperation¹⁴²

Media Name	Facebook Followers	Instagram Followers	Youtube Subscribers
KTRK	138,622	545,000	107,000
Ala-Too 24 (KTRK)	12,000	951	262,000
Vecherny Bishkek	52,602	20,400	642
Slovo Kyrgyzstana	2501	476	
ELTR	43,846	1,812	2,070
KABAR	16,000	63,100	5,560

Source: Compiled from publicly available social media pages of the local media entities.

According to two 2019 surveys, 88% and 90% of studied citizens in the Kyrgyz Republic first consume national news on television and listed television as their primary source of political information, with 36% naming KTRK as the most trusted source.¹⁴³ It is likely that those who

¹⁴¹ People's Daily, "“Explore a colorful China” - a side note on the opening of the second short-term visiting class of the Belt and Road News Cooperation Alliance" [“去探索多姿多彩的中国” ——第二期一带一路新闻合作联盟短期访学班开班侧记], October 2019, <https://finance.huanqiu.com/article/7R07JuucWn6>.

¹⁴² Data as of March 2022.

¹⁴³ Gulnura Toralieva, “Media influence matrix: Kyrgyzstan”, CEU Center for Meida, Data and Society, 2019, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1622/mimkyrgyzstanfunding.pdf>

are already regular consumers of KTRK also follow its presence on social media, particularly on Youtube, as it simply reposts what was broadcast on television. Other factors such as higher post frequency, content focus on entertainment, high engagement with followers, and Kyrgyz language use also contributed to the online successes of KTRK. According to official census records published by the National Committee of Statistics, around 65% of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic live in rural parts of the country and are likely to use Kyrgyz language instead of Russian language in their daily lives.¹⁴⁴

As for other media, KABAR publishes similar content except it also publishes popular local news about crimes such as kidnapping, murder and missing persons. ELTR's publishing style is similar to KTRK's, but since it focuses on reaching an audience in the less populous southern part of country, its popularity is behind that of KTRK. Vecherny Bishkek publishes a variety of content, starting from official news from governmental press releases to commentary articles from experts in different fields. Most notably, Vecherny Bishkek is amongst the popular local media organisations which occasionally publishes ideas that can be labelled as critical of the local government. However, further research should be conducted to examine this tendency. Despite paid promotion on social media, Vecherny Bishkek falls behind the others in terms of following. Slovo Kyrgyzstana publishes story-based content online, commentary from experts and the local population, lifestyle articles and local news. Amongst all of the above organisations, the content of Slovo Kyrgyzstana is the most light-hearted and non-political.

In terms of content about the PRC, most online content published by local media with PRC cooperation are in web article format, with a few stories in video format such as interviews with the Ambassador, field visits of Chinese companies in the Kyrgyz Republic, and so on. This study found no pattern in which a PRC-related web article gets reposted to Facebook and Instagram. For example, in 2021 alone, KTRK published 22 PRC-related posts (out of a total of 2371) on Instagram, yet it published at least 40 PRC-related articles on its website in the same period. Many of these posts focus on reporting about Chinese infrastructure projects in the Kyrgyz Republic, particularly the North-South Highway. However, on Ala-Too 24, sister channel of KTRK, there are dozens of video reports and news highlights which promote Xinjiang propaganda, debunking Chinese human rights violations.

In general, it can also be observed that local audiences react more to PRC-related content than to non-PRC-related content in terms of comments and views. However, quantitative measures fell outside scope of this research thus this is merely an anecdotal observation by those in the research team. PRC-related content tends to receive a varying degree comments with anti-PRC sentiments, such as dissatisfaction with Chinese-held debts, overwhelming dependence, and so on. However, on Ala-Too 24's Youtube channel, the majority of the PRC-related videos get an average of 3000 views, with overwhelming likes and few dislikes. A video posted on 14 May 2021 about receiving further grants from the PRC has had its comment function turned off, likely in a move to prevent the audience from using the platform to express anti-Chinese sentiments.¹⁴⁵

In order to further understand this dynamic online, as well as the nature of PRC related content and its social media presence, additional online research was conducted to identify the 20 most engaged with items related to the PRC on Facebook and Instagram between January 2019 and February 202 (see Tables 4 and 5. For methodology, see Appendix 2). It was found that the most engaged with posts were not posted by PRC-friendly media, but by Kyrgyz independent media which have no histories of cooperation with any PRC entities. This adds evidence to the fact that,

Center for insights in survey research, "Public Opinion Poll residents of Kyrgyzstan", International Republican Institute, 2019, https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/final_kyrgyzstan_slides.pdf .

¹⁴⁴ National Statistical Committee, "Population by type of location", [2021 жылдагы Кыргыз Республикасынын облустарынын, райондорунун, шаарларынын, шаар тибиндеги кыштактарынын калкынын саны], 2022, [http://www.stat.kg/ru/statistics/download/operational/769/.](http://www.stat.kg/ru/statistics/download/operational/769/)

¹⁴⁵ Ala-Too 24, "China is ready to allocate a grant to Kyrgyzstan and forgive interest for deferred public debt payments", [Китай готов выделить грант Кыргызстану и простить проценты за отсрочку платежей по госдолгу], May, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h3j4XSz2eg4>.

for example, despite PRC-friendly KTRK's large following size, its followers are not engaging with its content as much as those followers of other local media. Even amongst local media who were not found to have active cooperation with the PRC, more audience interacted with positive content on the PRC than negative content on the PRC.

In general, the most engaged with posts relating to the PRC on social media tend to highlight the positive aspects of the PRC, such as donation during COVID and speeches by local leadership on the PRC. Comparing Facebook and Instagram, 50% and 75% respectively of the top 20 most engaged with posts on PRC affairs are of a positive sentiment. Positive posts on Instagram enjoy significantly higher engagement, with between 13,000 to 20,000 likes and comments amongst the top 5 most engaged with posts, compared to between 700 to 1,400 for those on Facebook. Apart from the numbers, the fact that most of these Instagram posts are in the Kyrgyz language is a significant indication that the audience is likely majority rural population.

Table 4. Top 20 most engaged with posts with PRC related content on Facebook in the Kyrgyz Republic between January 2019 and February 2022

Content summary	Page name	Likes & Co.	Comments	Shares	Sentiment
Chinese billionaire Jack Ma donates COVID aid to Kyrgyzstan	AkiPress	1488	122	454	Positive
Counter arguments against anti-China sentiment	Edil Baisalov	732	636	100	Positive
Chinese officials acknowledge presence of COVID in Wuhan	Azattyk Media	688	119	384	neutral
Kyrgyz debt issues with China	Azattyk Media	510	529	88	Negative
Chinese investors in Kyrgyzstan donate COVID aid	Kaktus Media	731	65	189	Positive
Chinese businesses expelled from local market due to COVID	Kaktus Media	435	192	228	Negative
Chinese investors taking gold from Issyk-Kul province	Kabarlar	55	22	778	Negative
China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is necessary	Sooronbai Jeenbekov	731	75	26	Positive
Government chose Chinese company over local for Olympic team attire	24_kg	294	89	356	Negative
Chinese billionaire Jack Ma donates COVID aid to Kyrgyzstan	Kaktus Media	547	65	107	Positive
China to give aid to countries affected by COVID	Kaktus Media	319	137	166	Positive
Smuggling scheme of USD cash to China	Azattyk Media	473	46	87	Negative
China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is necessary	Sooronbai Jeenbekov	489	66	45	Positive
Chinese company violated local environmental law on chemical waste	Kaktus Media	215	30	330	Negative
China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is necessary	Sooronbai Jeenbekov	485	22	43	Positive
Protest against land rental to Chinese investors	24_kg	264	76	198	Negative
Chinese-built roads are of poor quality in Bishkek	Azattyk Media	295	82	140	Negative
China opened a new transport corridor to Uzbekistan via Kyrgyzstan	Sputnik Kyrgyzstan	324	57	102	Positive
Kyrgyz doctor against COVID follow recommendation of Chinese doctors	Kloop	328	17	124	Positive
European countries recall Chinese made COVID protective gear	Kaktus Media	212	57	182	Negative

Source: Compiled from publicly available social media pages of the local media through methodology discussed in Appendix 2.

Table 5. Top 20 most engaged with posts with PRC related content on Instagram in the Kyrgyz Republic between January 2019 and February 2022

Content summary	Page name	Likes & Co.	Comments	Sentiment
Ethnic Kyrgyz in China helped Chinese tourists	News.kg	20134	311	positive
Chinese company sponsored Kyrgyz Olympics attire	News.kg	17627	696	positive
Chinese development in the energy section, created an artificial sun	Maalymat.kg	13854	1281	positive
Proposing to ban Tiktok in Kyrgyzstan	Kadyr Jarmatov	13727	1219	negative
Kyrgyz President vaccinated with Sinopharm	News.kg	13618	569	positive
Russian blogger says China is buying up Kyrgyzstan	Kaktus Media	11948	794	negative
Chinese snacks give poor health to Kyrgyz children	Maalymat.kg	11026	523	negative
Local businessman defend investment deal with Chinese investors	News.kg	9990	823	positive
China donates \$100 million to Kyrgyz government	News.kg	8943	687	positive
President discuss Chinese debt repaying going well	azattyk.kg	8748	666	positive
Meeting between Kyrgyz and Chinese foreign ministers	Maalymat.kg	8632	420	neutral
PRC embassy rejects it demanded higher vaccination rate in Kyrgyzstan	News.kg	8484	391	positive
postive for Chinese vaccine	News.kg	8477	360	positive
Chinese built tunnels in mountains for new highway	Азаттык (kg)	7917	392	positive
Kyrgyzstan purchased Sinopharm vaccines	News.kg	7309	284	positive
China donates wheat to Kyrgyzstan	News.kg	7196	253	positive
China donates \$150 million to Kyrgyz government	News.kg	6857	405	positive
Chinese built roads enter into operation	News.kg	7018	135	positive
Chinese-Kyrgyz border closed for holiday	News.kg	6942	42	neutral
PRC Embassy discuss 30 years of friendly relation with Kyrgyzstan	News.kg	6711	247	positive

Source: Compiled from publicly available social media pages of the local media through methodology discussed in Appendix 2.

Apart from this, there is also active push from the PRC to introduce its voices in the Kyrgyz social media space. There are several Russian-speaking PRC nationals who actively maintain profiles as personality influencers who have placed targeted ads in the Kyrgyz Republic (see Table 6).

Table 6. PRC personality influencers on Facebook and TikTok with a presence in the Social Media landscape of the Kyrgyz Republic¹⁴⁶

Name	Following	Created date
Namila Namila	410,107	August 2020
Veryo-ne Veryo (Vera)	411,525	August 2020
QiTong Channel	319,000	September 2020
Tony_you	347,400	July 2020
Han_laoshi	79,800	September 2020
Yangge made in China	2,100,000	November 2019
Feiyazou	527,700	March 2021

Source: Compiled from publicly available social media pages in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Namila (page name Namila Namila), Vera (page name Верю-не верю) and QiTong (page name QiTong Channel) have placed Facebook ads to promote their pages in the Kyrgyz Republic.¹⁴⁷ Namila and Vera’s accounts joined Facebook in August 2020 back to back, Namila placed three ads in 2021 and five in 2022, and Vera placed 16 in 2021 and four in 2022. Examining Namila and Vera’s fanbase from among those reacted to their top 10 most engaged with posts in 2021, at least 392 and 131 individuals were from the Kyrgyz Republic, for each personality respectively (see Appendix 3 for methodology). Despite the differences in disclosing employment status as a PRC journalist, with Namila openly stating such links and Vera not, both have been labelled as PRC state-controlled media influencers by Facebook. According to public disclosure, 13 PRC nationals are managers of Namila’s page, whereas 16 PRC nationals are managers of Vera’s.

While these influencers maintain pages on Instagram and Youtube as well, they are most active on Facebook. Content-wise, both of them post a mix of PRC cultural and personal lifestyle stories, light commentary on domestic and global news, and food and tourism stories, all in the Russian language. On average, Namila enjoys more than 600 total reactions and 100 comments for short pre-recorded and live videos, and 500 reactions for text and photo posts, while Vera gets twice fewer reactions. Such content, on average, tends to have 50-70 comments, with the majority praising PRC culture, as well as the influencers’ beauty and language skills. There are also a few who criticize their role as PRC agents. For example, in one post on “Poetry ties our People,” a comment reads “Who are you trying to fool? China is restricting Islamic freedom of religion....this is oppression.”¹⁴⁸ In another post about the Olympic high speed train, a comment reads “All of these were built on the blood of East Turkestan’s Muslims.”¹⁴⁹

Occasionally, videos by Namila and Vera contain ad-like transition propaganda messages which highlight a PRC achievement. For example, before talking about apolitical topics such as poetry, art and entertainment, the first ten seconds of the short videos quickly mention how the PRC is combating COVID or eradicated poverty.¹⁵⁰ It can also be observed that there are always a few “top

¹⁴⁶ Data as of March 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Namila Namila Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/namila0910/>, Veryu-ne veryu facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/veryuneveryu2020/?ref=page_internal

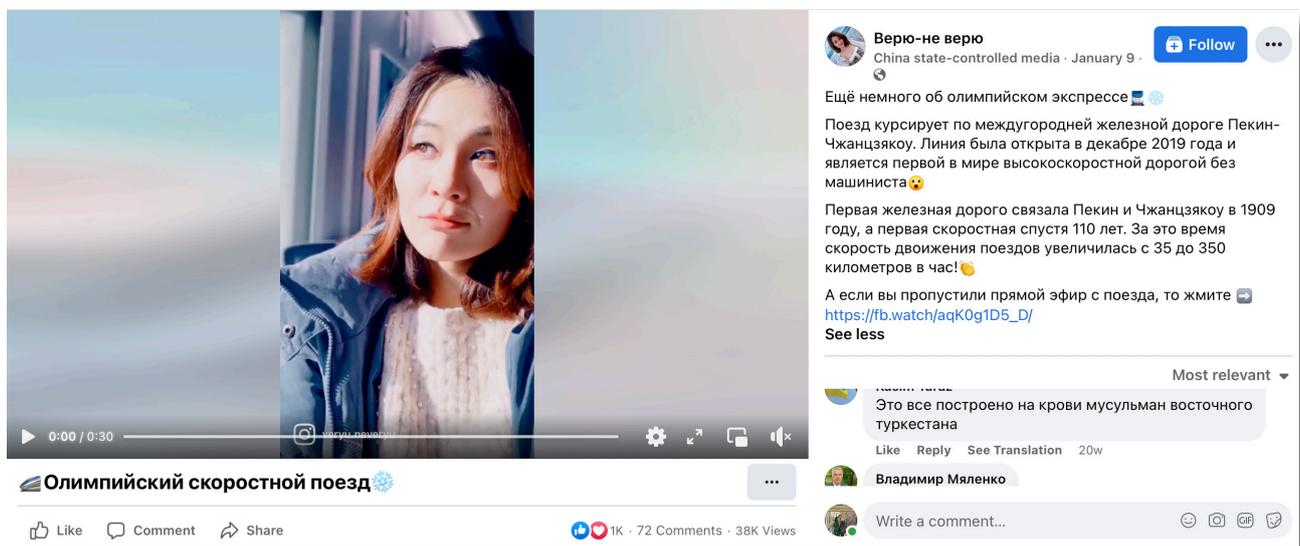
¹⁴⁸ NamilaNamila, “Poetrytiesus”, [Поэзиянасвязала], December, 2021 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5009746919056645>.

¹⁴⁹ Veryu-ne veryu, “Olympic high-speed train”, [Олимпийский скоростной поезд], January, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=612287553212137>.

¹⁵⁰ NamilaNamila, “Poetrytiesus”, [Поэзиянасвязала], December, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5009746919056645>.

fans” who consistently comment praising the PRC but are otherwise inactive accounts without posts and pictures.

Content by Namila and Vera can also be observed to be advancing the geopolitical interests and positions of the PRC. For example, Namila posted a short text portraying the United States as a weak country with promotional posters of several PRC-made documentaries about how American promotion of democracy has brought about negative impacts in host countries.¹⁵¹ On Russia’s War in Ukraine, in line with PRC policy to avoid overt displays of position on the conflict, Namila responded to the War with a tearful video about the loss of lives, with little indication of whether she was sympathetic to the Russians or the Ukrainians.¹⁵² Vera posted a similar video.¹⁵³ Following these tearful videos, both Namila and Vera posted follow-up videos explaining the PRC stance on the war, following statements published by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This shows that both Namila and Vera are actively engaging with global news in ways that represent the official PRC perspectives.



There are also Facebook groups established by PRC entities in the Kyrgyz Republic as well as others who target a broad audience in the former Soviet Republics (see Table 7).

¹⁵¹ Namila Namila's post on Facebook, December, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/namila0910/posts/396374402188534>.

¹⁵² Namila Namila, "Peace for peace", [Мирумир], February, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=367256225244103>.

¹⁵³ Veru-ne veru, "I am for peace, life and people", [Я за мир, за жизнь и за людей], February, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=268772605274490.

Table 7. Facebook groups and Instagram pages dedicated to PRC affairs available in the Kyrgyz Republic

Name	Following	Created date
People's daily newspaper	402,713	September 2012
One road one belt	46,500	February 2020
Panda studio China	43,548	January 2021
China town	21,112	August 2020
Xinhua	12,454	August 2015
Unsolved China	4,900	August 2018
Sinology kg	1,374	April 2018
Chinaembassyinkg	972	October 2021
Chinalogist	616	October 2014
Wonderful and magic China, culture, medicine, environment	203	January 2020
Railway China Kyrgyzstan Uzbekistan Europe	201	January 2020
Zhong Ji Mining	147	July 2019

Source: Compiled from publicly available social media pages in the Kyrgyz Republic.

A Reality Check: Assessing the PRC information influence

So far, this study has identified strategies used by the PRC to create PRC friendly content. Their effectiveness is a mixed case amongst Kyrgyz journalists. Some have indeed found PRC narratives appealing, as one local journalist who work closely with PRC entities, Interviewee 2 shared that “We try not to contribute to the spread of Sinophobia, it’s not justified at all, it’s just nationalism, we have specific staff on our editorial board who directly work on this.” Another journalist, Interviewee 7, who had returned from a PRC sponsored trip expressed that, “Before I visited China, I had no idea about the people there or culture, I only had stereotypes and prejudices, I came back a different person.”

However, while some efforts have worked on the surface, most have not been able to truly transcend the views of journalists. In practice, the majority of journalists targeted by the PRC recognize and are sober about the effects of PRC propaganda and influences.

- ▶ Interviewee 17, “Since China already achieved economic influence, they filled up our markets, now they start to expand their influence in media, to work on ideological views;”
- ▶ Interviewee 22, “China is greatly influencing Kyrgyz media but via an invisible way. We never noticed our neighbour China had already captured more space in the mass media of Kyrgyzstan very quietly. This is the Chinese policy; they do not attract attention but quietly capture;”
- ▶ Interviewee 35, “China as a Communist country never publishes negative content, and all the mass media only publishes positive content, and it is obvious that they [the PRC media] are under the control of the Chinese government;”
- ▶ Interviewee 42, “The Chinese manager [of a PRC media organisation] does not think about what it really looks like from outside. To be honest, this is all not professional and not grammatically correct. But they spend a lot of money, and the main question again is where are they spending this money? I believe that the Chinese employees in this newspaper solve zero issues. Perhaps this mechanism works in China, but it does not work here;”
- ▶ Interviewee 52, “They say the PRC media the Silk Road Observer is an instrument of building cultural ties between China and Kyrgyzstan. Actually, this was good idea, to open this media

in Kyrgyzstan. But the Chinese side of the media perceives it differently. This is a propaganda tool for them;”

- ▶ Interviewee 70, “I am thinking that China is pursuing a smooth but long-term invasion of Central Asian countries.

For most, it is out of convenience that they participate in visiting trips and specific trainings in order to have content to work with. Publishing the materials learned from the PRC instructors is a pragmatic choice. Likewise, it would be a mistake to say that all Kyrgyz media who publish PRC-friendly materials are pro-PRC, as Interviewee 68 put bluntly, “I would not say these media who work with China are China-friendly, they are only after the money. The media don’t even have much say in these agreements now, all the agreements are made between the two governments; the state media are just instruments.”

The use of and reliance on PRC media to create content in the Kyrgyz Republic is also problematic in many ways. While inserting content from PRC media into Kyrgyz media gives large control to the PRC in crafting its own narratives, the PRC media often fail to tailor to the tastes of the Kyrgyz public. This stems from a severe lack of understanding of local issues. One of the most obvious examples documented in this study was told to the researchers by Interviewee 71, a member of the production of a well-known local movie. Interviewee 71 was approached by a Chinese delegation to jointly produce a movie about the journey of a Chinese man coming to work in the Kyrgyz Republic who fell in love with a Kyrgyz girl. Recalling the conversation, Interviewee 71 said, “I told them Kyrgyz people will tear them apart after such movie; this is provocative”. The Chinese delegation seemed completely unaware of local Sinophobia and the issue of inter-racial marriage being one of the contributory factors.

Failing to tailor content to the local situation, Chinese information operations tend to replicate what is done in the PRC. According to Interviewee 42, who worked closely with a Chinese editorial manager, “It seems that none of the Chinese managers think about what it really looks like from outside, they just spend a lot of money.” When asked about the potential of PRC influence entering the Kyrgyz social media market, a popular social media influencer, Interviewee 66, explained that “I don’t think they will know how to work. In their country they work at the level of propaganda. China cannot work with new media.”

This is not an exaggerated statement. In the 1990s, when the Kyrgyz Republic experienced a shock from the lack of resources after becoming independent from the Soviet Union, the earliest efforts by PRC media, such as the Jungogo Sapar program and Dolon TV, were successful. The majority of the Kyrgyz population have been preliminary observed to have at one point watched Jungo Sapar, or to at least know of the program.¹⁵⁴ According to one former employee of Dolon TV, the broadcast company was successful in the early 2000s as the first mover to the Kyrgyz Republic to provide cable TV, but it has faced technical problems ever since in transitioning to newer technologies.

The PRC media’s own local channels are exceptionally poor at reaching the local Kyrgyz audience. Many former journalists who worked for these PRC media organisations explained that those who consume such media are often those who already have close connections with the PRC, such as family or business there. More importantly, as print goes out of fashion, and as the Kyrgyz media entities which have extensive cooperation with the PRC are not performing as well as others, printed propaganda is not reaching a broad audience. The PRC media organisations who work in the Kyrgyz Republic are themselves also failing to build an online presence. As explained by Interviewee 40, who works at Land Bridge, since the company is media registered in the PRC, special permits must be granted to open foreign social media accounts such as Facebook and Instagram. Failing to obtain this permit, Land Bridge remains a printed magazine with no online presence.

¹⁵⁴ In-depth research on exposure, understanding and effectiveness of Jungo Sapar will be examined in Report 3.

Apart from this, despite receiving lavish treatment, the turnover rate of local staff who work for PRC media organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic is extremely high. While the Chinese employers offer free Chinese language classes for local staff, only a minority is interested in studying due to the difficulty of the language and the challenges of balancing a demanding workload. Several local staff who worked for PRC media organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic described workplace cultural differences, especially regarding the principles of journalism. In one extreme case, Interviewee 52 described the work of Chinese editorial managers as unprofessional and treatment of media work as simply a “propaganda tool.”

It was found that those Kyrgyz media entities who enjoy extensive cooperation with the PRC also tend to actively engage with the local government through the publishing of press releases, attending events, and so on. There is also a severe gap of knowledge regarding PRC influence in the Kyrgyz media sector. Outside of the community of journalists who already have extensive cooperation with the PRC, others have zero knowledge. Be they to trips to the PRC, cultural events or holiday celebrations, several opposition media organisations report that they are never invited by PRC entities. According to an observation by Interviewee 13, “They wanted only those who are close to current power [in the Kyrgyz Republic].” Beyond staying close to the local government, there is also distribution advantage to working with such Kyrgyz media organisation. Those which are mostly pro-government if not state-owned are generally more effective in terms of reaching the local population. About 66% of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic live in remote villages with limited access to media beyond to free state-owned media.¹⁵⁵ Working with such Kyrgyz media, the PRC is able to insert content which is integrated with normal content.

The attempt to influence foreign policy preferences amongst Kyrgyz journalists and media professionals was prominent. Interviewee 13 recalled a briefing at the PRC Embassy before departing on a visiting trip, where it was said that “The purpose of these tours is to show positive aspects of China which can be an example for others, for us [the Kyrgyz Republic].” These trips also serve as opportunities for different Chinese parties to gather information and introduce political ideas about the internal affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. As recalled by several journalists, Chinese researchers and scholars who work on Central Asian affairs accompanied them and were engaged in detailed conversations about the Kyrgyz Republic.

- ▶ Interviewee 10, “[A Chinese researcher] told us that political instability in Kyrgyzstan creates problems in development. He knew exactly how many times our governments changed in the past years;”
- ▶ Interviewee 7, “They [Chinese researchers] were interested in our country; they were also curious what we knew about China;”
- ▶ Interviewee 3 and 6 shared that the Chinese side asked about what other organisations they were working with;
- ▶ Interviewee 16, “They [Chinese researchers] were aware of every concept in Kyrgyzstan. They tried to dismiss the concept that Chinese products are low quality and they showed us only high-quality products;”
- ▶ Interviewee 13, “They said Kyrgyzstan and China, since ancient times, were in a tight relationship, but in recent years this cooperation has been weakening. If the relationship is revived, they shared their plans to build the railway connecting the Great Silk Road in the future. It is said that Kyrgyzstan does not agree to this strategic cooperation. According to them, if Kyrgyzstan accepts the offer, it will benefit each side.”

¹⁵⁵ National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyz Republic, “Life expectancy”, 2020, <http://www.stat.kg/media/publication-archive/d78a8936-5c7a-4539-adb1-b5535c035ce8.xlsx>.

CONCLUSION

This report set out to show that PRC engagement in the Kyrgyz Republic goes beyond the economic and military spheres, and is no longer working exclusively with local elites. Overwhelming evidence from this report points to growing Chinese engagement in the media sector, targeting technocrats in the media space and the mass media audience. The Chinese whole-of-society influence building approach is becoming more and more visible in Central Asia. In practice, the Chinese approach to influence is founded on creating dependencies between targeted sectors and PRC actors.

In its approach to the media sector of the Kyrgyz Republic, the PRC has taken advantage of the relatively free information space in the country. It has employed three main strategies to promote positive views of the PRC and crowd out messages which are inconvenient to its image and policies in the Kyrgyz Republic. Various types of content are inserted within Kyrgyz media publications and broadcasts, including articles, short videos and documentaries. This is done via reprinting agreements, advertorials and paid tours to the PRC. Local presence of Chinese media plays a significant role in ensuring that such inserted content is tailor-made for audiences in the Kyrgyz Republic. Their on the ground presence also helps to facilitate cooperation with local Kyrgyz media organisations and journalists. Furthermore, the thriving social media space in the Kyrgyz Republic is not free from the presence of Chinese influences. Given the tactics used and covered above, the next report will detail the narratives that are being inserted and promoted by the PRC in the Kyrgyz Republic.

It is clear there are areas of vulnerability in the media space of the Kyrgyz Republic which can be addressed to manage media manipulations from foreign influences. Preliminary research on the effectiveness of such manipulation tactics shows that many among the journalists targeted by the PRC have a sober understanding of the intentions of the Chinese partners, judging their tactics as ineffective and unattractive. It is also clear that PRC ingression strategies towards the Kyrgyz media sector have been changing since 1992, especially with latest turn toward social media.

As a case study, this research contributes insights into global studies on Chinese influence. Locally, this will enable further research on the extent to which Chinese engagement in the media sector in the Kyrgyz Republic differs from that of other partners, the kinds of journalistic norms and practices the PRC promotes in the Kyrgyz Republic, the ability of journalism to serve in its watchdog capacity moving forward, and so on. Globally, this research seeks to bring Central Asian affairs and the Kyrgyz Republic into the wider debate, investigating how the case of the Kyrgyz Republic differ from investigations of PRC media influence in Latin America, or South East Asia; which similarities and differences in local setting lead to more Chinese engagement in the media sector; whether these similarities and differences are innate to the country's cooperative relationship with the PRC or are a result of the importance of these countries as perceived by the PRC; and so on.

Moving forward, the Kyrgyz Republic can expect a steady increase of Chinese engagement toward its media sector. Since 2018, Chinese concerns over the safety of its investments in the Kyrgyz Republic have reached new heights. As reflected through dozens of press releases from meetings between Chinese and Kyrgyz officials, this safety concern is tied to rising anti-China sentiments in the country, which the Chinese side blames on the lack of local understanding of the PRC. During these discussions, the rationale for media cooperation must be tailored to reflect the national security interests of the Kyrgyz Republic, such that initiatives do not interfere with domestic Kyrgyz political affairs. Left undealt with, catering to Chinese interest can potentially turn the Kyrgyz media sector into a tool of influence over official state positions on critical issues. An example is the case of the Philippines where local media ran narratives in support of the Chinese position regarding the South China Sea dispute.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ International federation of Journalists, "The China story: reshaping the world's media", June 2020, https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/IFJ_Report_2020_-_The_China_Story.pdf.

Elsewhere in the world, some countries have still managed to maintain a thriving media sectors resilient against third party influence. As the PRC continues to establish its authority over sources of news and information about the PRC, countries without independent capacity and access to a variety of views about Chinese affairs risk inability to make informed decisions when it comes to bilateral cooperation. It is in the interest of any given country to maximise benefits and minimise risks when working with a foreign partner, and the PRC is not an exception.

APPENDIX 1.

Interviewee List.

Code	Reference	Interview date	Place
Interviewee 1	Editorial Staff Akipress	10 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 2	Journalist, Vecherny Bishkek	13 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 3	Director, Local Media NGO	7 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 4	Senior Staff, KABAR	9 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 5	Senior Management, Keremet TV	10 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 6	Senior Management, Slovo Kyrgyzstana	12 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 7	Senior Staff, Ala-Too 24	13 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 8	Former Senior Journalist, KTRK	13 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 9	Staff, KTRK	14 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 10	Former Staff, State Media Service	14 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 11	Senior Management, Vecherny Bishkek	17 February 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 12	Former Senior Management, ELTR	2 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 13	Former Journalist, Osh TV	3 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 14	Staff, Yntymak TV	3 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 15	Senior Management, ELTR	4 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 16	Editorial Staff, Akipress	5 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 17	Senior Management, Yntymak TV	5 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 18	Senior Management, Keremet TV	10 January 2022	Osh
Interviewee 19	Former Journalist, KTRK	12 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 20	Former Senior Management, KTRK	14 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 21	Member of Production, Meken	21 March 2022	Online
Interviewee 22	Former Journalist, Silk Road Observer	4 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 23	Board Member, Association of Journalists	3 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 24	Senior Management, Local Media NGO	6 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 25	Senior Management, Public Association of Journalists	5 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 26	Former Senior Management, Factcheck	1 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 27	Former Staff, Press Service of Presidential Office	7 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 28	Former Journalist, Vecherny Bishkek	6 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 29	Former Senior Journalist, KTRK	8 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 30	Senior Management, Local Media NGO	9 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 31	Professor of Journalism, Local University	2 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 32	Professor of Journalism, Local University	2 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 33	Professor of Journalism, Local University	1 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 34	Professor of Journalism, Local University	3 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 35	Senior Management, Land Bridge	17 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 36	Staff, Xinhua	18 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 37	Former Senior Staff, Silk Road Observer	20 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 38	Former Journalist, Silk Road Observer	20 December 2021	Bishkek

Interviewee 39	Journalist, Silk Road Observer	21 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 40	Staff, Land Bridge	24 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 41	Journalist, CGTN	22 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 42	Former Journalist, Silk Road Observer	29 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 43	Senior Management, Dungan Newspaper	27 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 44	Former Journalist, China News Service	15 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 45	Senior Management, Dolon TV	27 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 46	Former Staff, Dolon TV	13 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 47	Former Senior Management, Dolon TV	14 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 48	Former Staff, Dolon TV	4 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 49	Former Technical Staff, Dolon TV	3 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 50	Senior Management, Dungan Newspaper	12 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 51	Former Journalist, Silk Road Observer	10 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 52	Former Senior Management, Silk Road Observer	7 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 53	Former Journalist, Silk Road Observer	5 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 54	Former Senior Journalist, Local Private Media	8 February 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 55	Senior Staff, Dungan Newspaper	3 February 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 56	Senior Management, Local Cultural Group	9 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 57	Senior Staff, State Media Service	9 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 58	Staff, Local NGO	10 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 59	Political Writer on Aksy conflict	11 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 60	Former Senior Management, Ne Sahar	13 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 61	Member of Parliament	14 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 62	Former Senior Management, Azattyk	17 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 63	Senior Management, NGO	20 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 64	Member of Parliament	21 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 65	Journalist, Azattyk	23 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 66	Senior Management, Ololo	23 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 67	Member of Production, Svet Ake	24 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 68	Former Senior Journalist, Azattyk	24 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 69	Senior Management, Local Tech Company	28 December 2021	Bishkek
Interviewee 70	Senior Management, KTRK	12 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 71	Member of Production, Salam New York	18 January 2022	Bishkek
Interviewee 72	Administrator, PRC-critical Facebook Group	3 January 2022	Online
Interviewee 73	Cultural Social Media Influencer	10 February 2022	Online

APPENDIX 2.

Research methodology for the top 20 most engaged with posts related to the PRC between January 2019 and February 2022.

The purpose of this analysis is to find the best estimate of the characteristics of popular social media posts which discuss the PRC on Facebook and Instagram in the Kyrgyz Republic. This research process suffered from Facebook's inherent obstacle against open-source research. The Meta company, originally Facebook, regularly updates its privacy policy, especially third-party access to public data on its platforms. As of 2022, it is now impossible to collect data on the fans and followers of an Influencer page on Facebook using Graph API without "The Page Public Content Access Feature". As a result, in order to analyse popular posts which discuss PRC online in the Kyrgyz Republic, a Germany-based social media online research service, FanpageKarma, was used. The company complies with EU rules on data and has existing agreements with Facebook. This study used FanpageKarma to access and analyse historical data on Kyrgyz Facebook and Instagram. Posts related to PRC affairs were exported from the tool.

A multi-layered process containing language, location and keyword filtering was deployed to collect and clean the data set. Only posts that had one or more of the key words ("Кытай" Chinese in Kyrgyz and "Китай" Chinese in Russian) along with the different adjectives that can be derived from these words like ("кытайлар" or "китайский") were collected from Facebook and Instagram. This was followed by a thorough personal checking of the data for relevance and accuracy. All the collected posts were published between 1 January 2019 and 1 February 2022.

Content in the Kyrgyz language on Facebook and Instagram is oriented toward a Kyrgyz speaking audience. However, content in Russian language featured in many more posts and is aimed toward Russian speaking audiences in different parts of the world. To find the content that was specifically aimed toward Kyrgyz people, a three-step cleaning method was used. First, all the posts that had geographic location identifiers from Russian-speaking countries other than the Kyrgyz Republic, such as Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, were removed. Second, this study looked for content that had a clear relationship to the Kyrgyz Republic with keywords such as кыргызстан, кыргыз, кг, бишкек, ош, Иссык-Куль, cities and locations in the country, local politicians (садыр жапаров, Сооронбай Жээнбеков) or specific news agencies that are popular on Kyrgyz social media (Kaktus Media, 24 Kg, Sputnik Кыргызстан, Kloop, AKIpress, Azattyk Media, news.kg), and other channels. Third, research members manually checked posts for relevance to the PRC and the PRC's relationship with the Kyrgyz Republic. This process generated a list of the 30 most liked posts concerning PRC affairs available in the Kyrgyz Republic on Facebook and Instagram between 1 January 2019 and 1 February 2022.

The final step involved judgement based on sentiment. This study defined content sentiment toward the PRC from the Chinese perspective, following the research objective of finding out the extent of PRC influence in the information space. This meant that the content was judged to be positive if it highlighted a positive aspect of the PRC from the Chinese perspective, regardless of how it was perceived by the locals. Often, what was perceived as positive for the PRC could be perceived as negative for the locals, for example interracial marriages and cheap loan deals. In order to understand PRC information influence tactics, this study adopted the Chinese perspective.

APPENDIX 3.

Research methodology for size of fanbase coming from the Kyrgyz Republic among the top 10 most engaged with posts in 2021.

The purpose of this analysis was to find out, to the best estimate, the percentage of two influencers' fans/followers who live in/come from Kyrgyzstan. The research process suffered from Facebook's inherent obstacle against open-sourced research, which prevents non-administrators from obtaining demographic details of followers. The Meta company, originally Facebook, regularly updates its privacy policy, especially with regards to third-party access to public data on its platforms. As of 2022, it is now impossible to collect data on the fans and followers of an Influencer page on Facebook using Graph API without "The Page Public Content Access Feature". In addition, a list of an influencer fans/followers is inaccessible through Facebook front-end to public users who are not an admin of the page or who do not have admin permission access to the page.

As a result, in order to obtain a comprehensive and sufficient sample of the fanbase size of Namila Namila and Veryo-ne Veryo, this study reviewed and manually collected the names and URLs of accounts who engaged with the 10 most popular posts for each page between 1 January 2021 and 31 December 2021. The total number of unique accounts who engaged (with likes, love and other responses) with the 10 most popular posts in 2021 were taken as a sufficient sample from the total fans/followers population.

Since automatically collecting data from Facebook front-end is illegal and Meta can file lawsuits against scrappers, all of the data collected in this study was collected manually, viewed one by one. First, the top 10 most popular posts in 2021 published by Namila Namila and Veryo-ne Veryo were determined with the use of FanpageKarma, a Germany-based social media online research service. The company complies with EU rules on data and has existing agreements with Facebook. Second, 21,000 and 18,000 URLs from all accounts who engaged with the 10 most popular posts in 2021 by Namila Namila and Veryo-ne Veryo respectively were manually collected. Third, researchers manually looked for the names of the accounts based on linguistic variables (Kyrgyz language, Kyrgyz last names and first names written in Kyrgyz, Cyrillic or Latin), before generating a final list based on self-declared location of birth and currently locations.

This study could not confirm the location of every account identified due to insufficient information provided to the public by the users. As a result, there is likely a larger portion of the Kyrgyz population following these two influencers. Nevertheless, this study managed, to the best of the researchers' abilities given time constraints, to conduct a manual study of the demographic details of those following of these two influencers. There are several advantages to this method, the research team double checked all results manually by hand and used a large sample size with a 99% confidence level and 1% margin of error. Furthermore, engagement is a good indicator of relationship between influencer and follower, and thus a good indicator of those who are interested in the content provided by the influencer. The results showed that the majority of engagement comes from Russian speaking countries, and that the very small percentage of users confirmed to be from/live in Kyrgyzstan corresponds with the small population size of the Kyrgyz republic, in comparison to Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and other Russian speaking counties that appeared frequently in the location of users analysed in the research.

The process identified 392 and 131 Kyrgyz individuals who engaged with Namila Namila and Veryo-ne Veryo, respectively. These results show that that 1.87% of Namila Namila fans can be confirmed

to be from or live in Kyrgyzstan with 99% confidence a 1% margin of error. This error margin is 0.75% for Vero-ly Vero.

The statistical calculations were based on the overall fanbase size at the end of 2021. This was 317,000 for Namila. Our sample size for Namila was 21,000 unique accounts. While not all of them were followers, they engaged in social media interaction with the influencer. To achieve a 99% confidence level with 1% margin of error, the sample size should be 15,700 unique accounts. The analysis in this research included 21,000 unique accounts. To be 95% confident with a 1% percent margin of error (acceptable in most statistical research), the analysis would have needed to include 1000 unique accounts. This research manually checked 3821 accounts, of which 392 can be confirmed to be of individuals from or living in Kyrgyzstan.

The same statistical calculation was applied in analysing the fanbase of Vero-ly Vero's, which was 314,292 at the end of 2021. The sample size for the analysis was 18,000 unique accounts collected from the engaged population based upon the 10 most popular posts in 2021. This makes up 5.7% of the fanbase. The results can confirm that at least 0.72% of the sample are from or live in Kyrgyzstan.