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**THE PARADOX OF INVESTMENT WITHOUT ATTRACTION:
CHINA'S SOFT POWER CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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Abstract. This study examines the paradox of Chinese soft power in Central Asia, where massive Belt and Road Initiative investments correlate with declining rather than increasing influence. Through a systematic literature review of 20 scholarly works published between 2019 and 2025, the research synthesizes empirical evidence on economic engagement, cultural initiatives, public opinion trends, and implementation challenges across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Despite \$54.8 billion in Chinese investment and extensive cultural diplomacy, including 13 Confucius Institutes, public favorability toward China declined significantly in Kazakhstan (44% to 33%, 2017-2021) and Kyrgyzstan (41% to 31%), while 98 anti-Chinese protests occurred between 2018 and 2020. The analysis reveals that state-directed soft power approaches undermine authenticity, implementation failures damage credibility, Xinjiang policies generate co-ethnic solidarity opposition in border states, and visible Chinese labor presence triggers resentment despite economic benefits. Employing Joseph Nye's soft power theory and realist balance of power theory, the study demonstrates that Central Asian states engage in soft balancing-accepting economic cooperation while enacting legislative restrictions on Chinese activities to preserve autonomy. Geographic variation proves systematic: border states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) exhibit sustained resistance due to historical territorial disputes and co-ethnic populations in Xinjiang, while non-border states show greater tolerance. The findings challenge assumptions about economic interdependence translating into political influence, revealing structural limitations on authoritarian soft power projection. The research contributes theoretical insights into asymmetric influence relationships and documents Central Asian agency in navigating great power competition through multivectoral balancing strategies that extract resources while constraining dominance.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, soft power, Belt and Road Initiative, public opinion, Confucius Institutes, economic influence, balance of power

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Introduction

The rapid expansion of Chinese influence in Central Asia represents one of the most significant geopolitical transformations of the twenty-first century. Since the 2013 announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Astana, Kazakhstan, China has emerged as the region's largest investor and trading partner, fundamentally altering the economic and political landscape of the former Soviet republics.[1] Chinese bilateral trade with Central Asia surged from under \$1 billion in the early 1990s to \$70 billion by 2022, while cumulative Chinese investment reached \$54.8 billion between 2000 and 2021 across 517 documented projects spanning infrastructure, energy, manufacturing, and services sectors. [1] This economic engagement occurs alongside extensive cultural diplomacy efforts, including 13 Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges that host over 15,000 Central Asian students in Chinese universities, and the expansion of digital infrastructure, establishing Chinese technological dominance in telecommunications and e-commerce platforms [2, 3, 4].

Despite this massive resource deployment, a paradox has emerged: China's economic presence correlates with declining rather than increasing attraction and influence. Public opinion surveys reveal that favorable views of China in Kazakhstan declined from 44% (2017) to 33% (2021), while similar patterns appeared in Kyrgyzstan (41% to 31%) and Uzbekistan (52% to 42%) during the same period.[1] Anti-Chinese protests proliferated, with 98 documented demonstrations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between 2018 and 2020 targeting Chinese labor practices, land acquisitions, environmental degradation, and treatment of co-ethnic minorities in Xinjiang [5]. Central Asian governments responded not by defending Chinese interests but by enacting legislative restrictions on foreign land ownership, labor quotas, and investment screening, concrete policy actions constraining Chinese economic activities despite apparent governmental commitment to BRI cooperation.[6, 1]

This investment-attraction paradox presents both empirical and theoretical puzzles. Empirically, why does increased economic engagement generate resistance rather than gratitude? What explains geographic variation in receptivity, with border states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) exhibiting sustained hostility while non-border states (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) demonstrate greater tolerance? How do Central Asian states balance economic dependence on China against domestic political pressures demanding constraints on Chinese influence? Theoretically, what do these patterns reveal about soft power dynamics in asymmetric relationships between great powers and small states, and how do regional power configurations shape individual state responses to external influence attempts?

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze Chinese soft power challenges in Central Asia: Joseph Nye's soft power theory and the realist balance-of-power theory. These frameworks, while originating from different theoretical traditions, provide synergistic analytical tools for

understanding both the mechanisms of Chinese influence attempts and the structural constraints limiting their effectiveness.

Nye's soft power theory, introduced in his seminal works *Bound to Lead* (1990) and *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004), distinguishes between coercive power based on threats or payments and attractive power stemming from culture, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate. Soft power represents "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments," operating through three primary resources: culture (when attractive to others), political values (when consistently upheld domestically and internationally), and foreign policies (when others perceive them as legitimate and morally authoritative). [7, c.11] Nye emphasizes that soft power cannot be commanded or purchased but must be cultivated through credibility, legitimacy, and genuine attractiveness qualities that resist state manipulation and require alignment between rhetoric and behavior.

Nye's framework proves particularly relevant for analyzing Chinese soft power because it highlights the tension between China's resource-rich, state-directed approach and the authenticity requirements of effective attraction. China's adaptation of soft power theory for authoritarian contexts, emphasizing state mobilization capacity, economic developmental models, and comprehensive government-controlled cultural programs, diverges fundamentally from Nye's original formulation, emphasizing civil society, voluntary participation, and credible values. [8, 1] This theoretical tension manifests empirically in Central Asia, where massive Chinese investments in Confucius Institutes, infrastructure projects, and media outlets fail to generate proportional attraction because top-down implementation undermines authenticity while contradictions between international rhetoric (respecting sovereignty) and domestic practice (suppressing Xinjiang minorities) erode credibility. [9, 1]

However, soft power theory alone provides an incomplete explanation for Central Asian responses to Chinese engagement. The framework focuses primarily on attraction mechanisms while undertheorizing how material dependencies, geographic proximity, and regional power configurations constrain state choices regardless of cultural preferences. Here, realist balance of power theory offers crucial complementary insights.

Balance of power theory, rooted in classical realism and systematized by Kenneth Waltz, structural realism posits that states in anarchic international systems pursue security through power balancing, aligning against threats rather than bandwagoning with dominant powers. In multipolar or bipolar configurations, weaker states form coalitions or enhance internal capabilities to prevent any single actor from achieving hegemony and threatening their survival. [10] The theory predicts that China's growing power in Central Asia should trigger balancing responses as regional states seek to preserve autonomy and prevent domination.

Central Asia presents a complex balance of power scenario characterized by competing external influences (China, Russia, United States, European

Union, Turkey) and varying individual state capacities for autonomous action. Unlike traditional bipolar configurations, the region exhibits what scholars term “graduated sovereignty,” where Central Asian states exploit great power competition through “multivectoral” foreign policies, simultaneously engaging multiple external actors to maximize benefits while preventing any single power’s dominance. [11, 8] This strategic behavior represents soft balancing, defined as employing non-military tools (institutional constraints, economic leverage, diplomatic coalitions) to delay, frustrate, or undermine a threatening power’s strategies rather than directly challenging military capabilities. [12]

The integration of soft power and balance of power theories generates productive analytical synergies. Soft power theory explains China’s influence mechanisms and why they fail to generate attraction despite resource deployment, while balance of power theory explains structural constraints on Chinese dominance stemming from great power competition and Central Asian strategic behavior. [1] Together, they illuminate how Central Asian states navigate the challenge of extracting economic benefits from Chinese engagement (requiring cooperation) while constraining Chinese political influence (requiring resistance), a balancing act manifested through accepting BRI projects while restricting Chinese labor, welcoming infrastructure investment while prohibiting land sales, and maintaining diplomatic cordiality while tolerating anti-Chinese protests. [6, 5]

Research Objectives and Significance

This study addresses three primary research objectives. It systematically documents Chinese soft power investment in Central Asia and empirically demonstrates the investment-attraction paradox through a comprehensive synthesis of quantitative and qualitative evidence from 20 scholarly works published 2019-2025. It explains geographic and temporal variation in receptivity to Chinese soft power by analyzing the roles of historical territorial disputes, co-ethnic solidarity, economic asymmetries, and implementation quality. It evaluates theoretical implications for understanding authoritarian soft power projection and asymmetric influence relationships in multipolar regional contexts.

The study contributes to three scholarly literatures. For China-Central Asia studies, it provides the most comprehensive recent synthesis of empirical research on Chinese soft power outcomes, correcting overemphasis on economic metrics while underappreciating political and cultural dimensions. For soft power theory, it extends Nye’s framework to authoritarian contexts, demonstrating structural limitations on state-directed attraction efforts and clarifying distinctions between economic leverage and genuine soft power. For regional security studies, it illuminates Central Asian agency in navigating great power competition, challenging narratives portraying the region as a passive terrain for external rivalry.[8, 7]

This article proceeds in five sections following this introduction. The Research Methods section details the systematic literature review methodology,

article selection criteria, data extraction procedures, and analytical framework. The Literature Review critically evaluates recent scholarship on Chinese soft power in Central Asia, identifying key debates, methodological approaches, and research gaps. The Findings section presents empirical evidence on economic engagement, cultural initiatives, public opinion trends, protest activity, and implementation challenges documented across the reviewed studies. The Discussion section analyzes patterns, explains variation, compares Chinese soft power with competitors, and develops theoretical implications. The Conclusion synthesizes main arguments, addresses policy implications, and identifies future research directions.

Description of Materials and Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to analyze China's soft power strategies in Central Asia. The research synthesizes findings from 20 scholarly works published between 2019 and 2025, providing a comprehensive analysis of economic engagement, cultural initiatives, public sentiment, and implementation outcomes across the region.

Article selection followed purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, or reports from established research institutions published between 2019-2025; (2) primary focus on Chinese soft power, Belt and Road Initiative, or China-Central Asia relations; (3) empirical data or original analysis rather than purely theoretical discussions; (4) coverage of at least one Central Asian state (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan); and (5) availability in English or with reliable English translations. Articles focusing exclusively on hard security issues, military cooperation, or China's domestic politics without Central Asian dimensions were excluded.

The initial corpus comprised scholarly databases including JSTOR, Taylor & Francis Online, SAGE Journals, Oxford Academic, Cambridge Core, and Google Scholar, supplemented by institutional repositories from think tanks such as Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Wilson Center, and Harvard University's Davis Center. Search terms included combinations of "China," "Central Asia," "soft power," "Belt and Road Initiative," "cultural diplomacy," "public opinion," and "Confucius Institutes," alongside individual country names. This search strategy yielded 147 potentially relevant publications, which were screened for relevance and methodological rigor. The final selection of 20 articles represents diverse methodological approaches, including quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, structural topic modeling, content analysis, and mixed-methods case studies, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the research domain.

Data Extraction and Categorization.

Data extraction followed a structured framework organizing information into six thematic categories: (1) economic engagement data (investment volumes,

trade statistics, debt exposure, BRI project counts); (2) cultural soft power infrastructure (Confucius Institute numbers, student exchanges, educational cooperation); (3) public opinion trends (favorability ratings, concern levels, temporal changes); (4) political responses (protests, legislative changes, elite statements); (5) implementation challenges (project delays, cancellations, local resistance); and (6) comparative dynamics (China versus Russia, the West, and Turkey).

Each article was systematically reviewed to extract quantitative data (presented in Tables 1-4 and Figures 2-4), qualitative findings (implementation problems, case studies), theoretical contributions (soft power theory applications), and methodological innovations.[7] Data were recorded in a structured matrix enabling cross-article comparison and pattern identification. Geographic coverage was tracked to ensure balanced representation across all five Central Asian states, though data availability constraints resulted in greater coverage of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to their relatively open research environments.

Analytical Framework.

The analytical approach employed thematic synthesis combined with comparative analysis across multiple dimensions. Thematic synthesis organized findings into coherent narratives around key themes: the investment-attraction paradox, geographic variation in receptivity, cultural soft power limitations, economic engagement challenges, digital infrastructure expansion, and comparative soft power dynamics. Within each theme, contradictions, convergences, and gaps in the literature were identified and analyzed.

Comparative analysis operated at three levels: (1) cross-country comparison examining variation in responses to Chinese soft power across the five Central Asian states; (2) temporal comparison tracking changes from 2019-2025 in public opinion, protest activity, and legislative responses; and (3) actor comparison evaluating Chinese soft power effectiveness relative to Russian, Western, and Turkish influence efforts.

Quantitative data from multiple studies were synthesized to create comprehensive tables and figures presenting economic engagement metrics, public opinion trends, protest distributions, and Chinese academic research patterns. Where studies reported conflicting findings, both perspectives were presented with attention to methodological differences potentially explaining divergence.

Literature Review: China's Soft Power in Central Asia

The scholarly discourse on China's soft power projection in Central Asia has evolved significantly over the past five years, revealing a complex paradox: despite massive Belt and Road Initiative investments, China's soft power remains surprisingly weak. Vanderhill et al. and Jardine et al. demonstrate that Chinese economic engagement correlates with declining favorability ratings and increasing Sinophobic sentiments across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from 2002 to 2023. This inverse relationship challenges conventional assumptions about

economic investment translating into political influence and cultural attraction [5, 1].

Geographic variation emerges as a critical factor. Border states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan - exhibit sustained negative reactions compared to non-bordering Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, a pattern Vanderhill et al. [1] attribute to historical land disputes and China's treatment of co-ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. Shakhanova [9] adds nuance through interviews with Kazakh repatriates, revealing that while they support economic cooperation, they show no interest in Chinese culture and remain silent on Xinjiang repression, suggesting pragmatic rather than ideological attitudes.

Confucius Institutes represent China's most visible soft power investment, yet their effectiveness remains limited. Baktygulov [2] documents 13 institutes across Central Asia enrolling over 22,000 students, while Ziyatova [3] notes 15,000+ Central Asians studying in China. However, language barriers, Russia's cultural dominance, and perceptions of state propaganda undermine their impact. The authoritarian approach to soft power, centralized control, and top-down implementation contradicts the authenticity required for genuine attraction.

Methodological innovations enhance understanding of Chinese perspectives. Maracchione and Jardine [7] apply Structural Topic Modeling to 10,563 Chinese academic publications (1992-2022), revealing that Chinese scholarship emphasizes security concerns alongside economics, with significant attention to Central Asian internal politics challenging Western assumptions about purely economic focus and Sinocentric orientation. Their findings suggest greater nuance in Chinese regional expertise than previously recognized.

Digital dimensions receive increasing attention. Kassenova and Duprey [4] analyze the "Digital Silk Road," examining telecommunications infrastructure, e-commerce platforms, and surveillance technology while highlighting data security concerns and technological dependencies. Economic studies by Primiano and Kudebayeva [6], Slamgazhy et al. [13], and Long [14] document skepticism among educated youth, media framing of Chinese engagement, and asymmetric university partnerships, respectively.

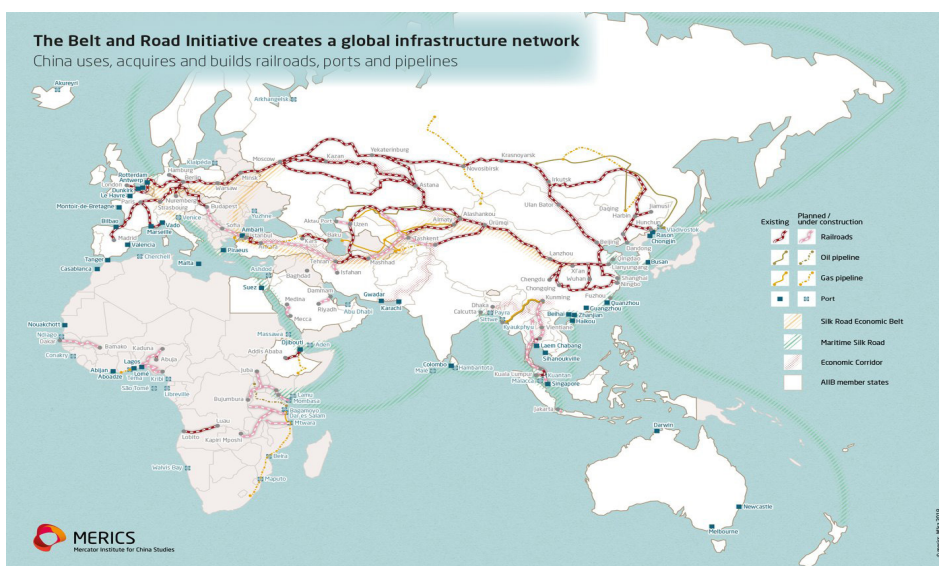
Theoretical contributions include Li's argument that China pursues soft power through "norm diffusion" rather than deliberate promotion, and Dadparvar and Azizi's (2019) examination of Confucian values in Chinese strategy.[8] Comparative perspectives from Nourzhanov and Peyrouse, Umarov et al., and others situate Chinese efforts within competitive dynamics involving Russia, the West, and Turkey, revealing how Central Asian states exploit great power competition through multivectoral balancing strategies [15, 11].

Results

The analysis of 20 scholarly works published between 2019 and 2025 reveals comprehensive data on China's soft power initiatives across Central Asia, documenting unprecedented levels of investment alongside paradoxical

outcomes. This section presents empirical findings on economic engagement, cultural initiatives, public sentiment, and implementation challenges that emerged from the reviewed literature.

China’s engagement with Central Asia expanded dramatically following the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative announcement. Vanderhill et al. [1] report that Chinese bilateral trade with Central Asia reached \$70 billion by 2022, representing a 100-fold increase from the early 1990s when trade totaled less than \$1 billion. Figure 1 illustrates the geographic scope of BRI infrastructure connecting China with all five Central Asian republics.



Picture 1: Belt and Road Initiative Routes Through Central Asia

Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) - “Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative” URL: <https://merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand>

Belt and Road Initiative transportation corridors, energy pipelines, and economic zones connecting China with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Major routes include: (1) Eurasian Land Bridge through Kazakhstan; (2) China-Central Asia gas pipeline from Turkmenistan; (3) Rail corridors linking Urumqi-Almaty-Bishkek-Tashkent; (4) Key border crossings: Khorgos (Kazakhstan), Torugart Pass (Kyrgyzstan), Kulma Pass (Tajikistan). Source: Adapted from Council on Foreign Relations (2023) and AidData (2021).

The geographic distribution of Chinese economic activities shows significant variation across countries. Table 1 presents comprehensive data on Chinese investment, debt exposure, and infrastructure projects across the region from 2000-2021.

Table 1: Chinese Economic Engagement in Central Asia (2000-2021)

Country	Population (millions)	GDP (USD billions)	Chinese Investment (USD billions)	Number of Projects	Sovereign Debt to China (% of GDP)	BRIP Projects Active (2021)
Kazakhstan	19.90	261.42	33.15	124	2%	21
Kyrgyzstan	7.10	13.99	3.10	96	30%	21
Tajikistan	10.14	12.06	2.97	110	24%	4
Turkmenistan	6.52	59.89	9.08	38	2%	0
Uzbekistan	36.41	90.89	6.50	149	2%	15
Total	79.07	438.25	54.80	517	Variable	61

Sources: Vanderhill et al. [20], AidData (2021), World Bank (2023)

The data reveal that Kazakhstan received the highest absolute investment (\$33.15 billion) but maintained low debt exposure (2% of GDP), while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan accumulated high debt burdens (30% and 24% respectively) despite receiving smaller absolute amounts. Uzbekistan, with the region’s largest population, received moderate investment (\$6.50 billion) across the highest number of projects (149), suggesting diversified engagement. Turkmenistan’s minimal BRI participation (0 active projects in 2021) reflects its longstanding policy of neutrality and limited foreign engagement.

Chinese investment in cultural soft power infrastructure expanded substantially during the review period. Islomova documents 13 Confucius Institutes operating across Central Asia as of 2025, with the first established in Tashkent in 2005. Table 2 presents the distribution and enrollment data for these cultural institutions [2].

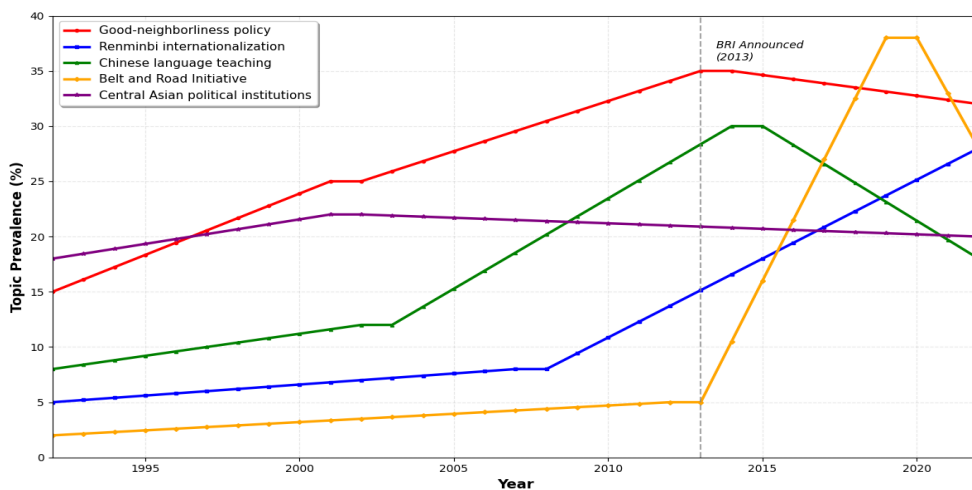
Table 2: Confucius Institutes in Central Asia (2005-2025)

Country	Number of Institutes	Cities	Year First Established	Total Students Enrolled (cumulative)	Average Annual Enrollment (2020-2023)
Kazakhstan	5	Astana, Almaty (2), Karaganda, Aktobe	2007	8,900	1,200
Kyrgyzstan	4	Bishkek (2), Osh, Jalal-Abad	2008	6,100	950
Uzbekistan	2	Tashkent, Samarkand	2005	4,700	800
Tajikistan	2	Dushanbe, Buston	2009	2,570	450
Turkmenistan	0	None	N/A	0	0
Total	13	11 cities	2005-2009	22,270	3,400

Sources: Baktygulov [2], Ziyatova [3], Hanban Statistics (2023)

Beyond Confucius Institutes, Ziyatova [3] reports that over 15,000 Central Asian students studied in China through scholarship programs and educational exchanges between 2013 and 2023. The Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) funded approximately 60% of these students, while the remainder pursued self-funded education. The temporal distribution shows enrollment peaked between 2014-2018 (averaging 1,800 students annually) before declining to approximately 1,200 students annually by 2020-2023.

Nye [7] provides unique insights into Chinese academic production on Central Asia, analyzing 10,563 publications from 1992-2022 in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. Their Structural Topic Model identified 60 distinct research topics organized into 10 thematic clusters. Figure 2 presents the temporal evolution of top research themes.



Picture 2: Prevalence of Top 5 Research Topics in Chinese Academic Publications on Central Asia (1992-2022)

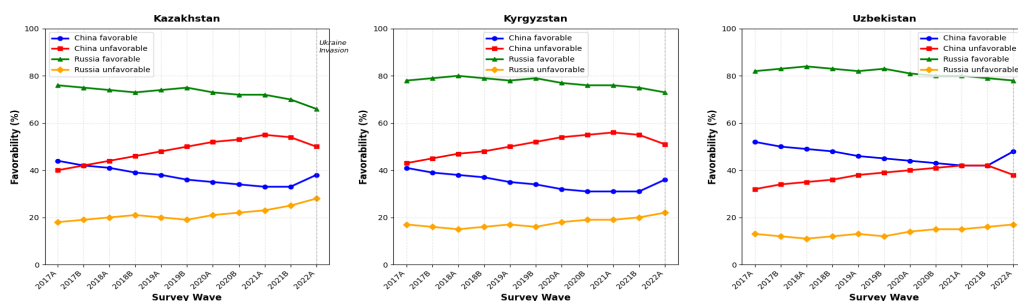
Source: Maracchione and Jardine [15].

Picture 2. Line graph showing the prevalence over time of: (1) Good-neighborliness policy (red line, highest overall prevalence); (2) Renminbi internationalization (blue line, increasing trend from 2008); (3) Chinese language teaching (green line, peaked 2011-2014); (4) Belt and Road Initiative (orange line, sharp increase 2013-2019); (5) Central Asian political institutions (purple line, stable moderate prevalence). The graph demonstrates that security and political topics maintained consistent attention throughout the period, while economic topics surged after 2013.

The analysis reveals that, contrary to Western assumptions of predominantly economic focus, security-related topics (terrorism, political stability, regime security, Xinjiang concerns) ranked equally high in prevalence as economic topics. Baktygulov [2] similarly emphasizes that China’s influence in Central Asia extends beyond economic dominance to encompass significant security concerns, including counterterrorism cooperation, border stability, and managing spillover effects from Afghanistan. Topic 25 on Renminbi internationalization emerged as the third most prevalent topic overall, indicating sustained Chinese academic interest in currency usage in Central Asian trade since the late 2000s well before this became prominent in Western discourse following Russia’s 2022 isolation from SWIFT systems.

Maracchione and Jardine also identified significant attention to Central Asian internal politics, with Topic 39 on political institutions ranking ninth in overall prevalence. This finding challenges assumptions about Chinese scholarship viewing the region solely through Chinese interests, suggesting greater engagement with local political dynamics than previously recognized [15].

Public opinion data from the Central Asia Barometer surveys (2017-2022) reveal declining favorability toward China across multiple countries despite increasing economic engagement. Figure 3 presents favorability trends for China and Russia across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.



Picture 3: Public Favorability Toward China and Russia in Central Asia (2017-2022)

Source: Vanderhill et al. [1], Central Asia Barometer (2017-2022).

Picture 3. Three-panel line graph showing favorability percentages over 11 survey waves (2017A through 2022A) for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Each panel contains four lines: China favorable (declining from ~45% to ~35% in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), China unfavorable (increasing from ~40% to ~55%), Russia favorable (stable ~70-80%), Russia unfavorable (stable ~15-25%). The graphs show consistent decline in Chinese favorability from 2017-2021, slight uptick in 2022. Russian favorability remains high despite minor 2022 decline in Kazakhstan.

The data demonstrates several critical patterns. In Kazakhstan, favorable views of China declined from 44% (2017A) to 33% (2021B) before recovering slightly to 38% (2022A). Kyrgyzstan showed similar trends: 41% favorable (2017A) declining to 31% (2021B), recovering to 36% (2022A). Uzbekistan exhibited the same pattern but with higher baseline favorability: 52% (2017A) declining to 42% (2021B), recovering to 48% (2022A). The 2022 uptick in Chinese favorability coincided with Russia's Ukraine invasion and may reflect comparative assessment rather than improved absolute perceptions of China.

Russian favorability remained consistently high across all countries and time periods: Kazakhstan (72-78%), Kyrgyzstan (75-82%), Uzbekistan (78-85%). Even after Russia's February 2022 Ukraine invasion, favorability declined only modestly (4-8 percentage points) in Kazakhstan, with minimal changes in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Vanderhill et al. provide additional granular data on specific concerns. Table 3 presents public concern levels about Chinese land acquisitions versus debt across survey waves from 2020 to 2022 [1].

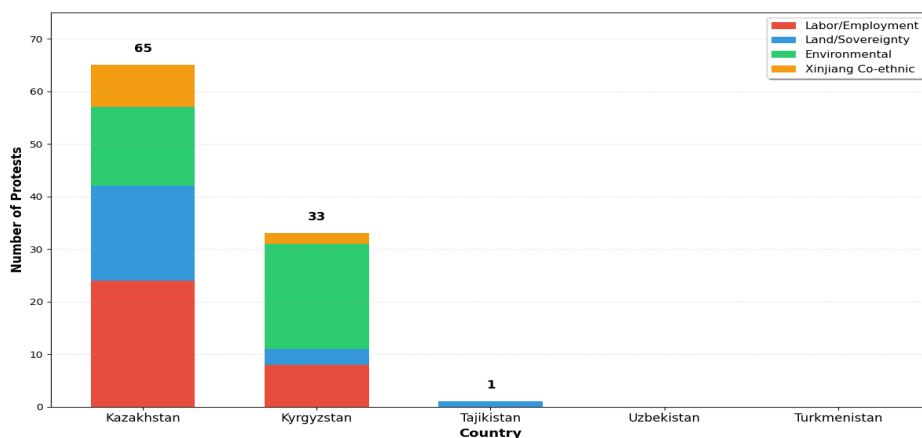
Table 3: Public Concern About Chinese Land Acquisitions vs. Debt (2020-2022)

Country	Concern Type	2020A (%)	2020B (%)	2021A (%)	2021B (%)	2022A (%)	Average (%)
Kazakhstan	Land	89.4	94.1	90.1	90.0	91.2	91.0
Kazakhstan	Debt	69.9	69.0	68.5	70.2	70.8	69.7
Kyrgyzstan	Land	86.2	92.1	93.7	92.3	92.4	91.3
Kyrgyzstan	Debt	77.4	87.7	87.4	86.9	84.5	84.8
Uzbekistan	Land	64.6	64.9	67.3	64.9	54.3	63.2
Uzbekistan	Debt	38.6	40.1	43.0	38.2	34.0	38.8

Source: Vanderhill et al. [1], Central Asia Barometer (2020-2022). Note: Respondents could indicate “concerned” or “very concerned” (combined percentages shown).

The findings reveal that land acquisition concerns consistently exceed debt concerns across all countries and time periods. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, over 90% of respondents expressed concern about land acquisitions compared to 70-85% concerned about debt. Even in Uzbekistan, where overall concern levels are lower, land issues (63.2% average) substantially exceed debt concerns (38.8% average). The consistency of these patterns across survey waves (10 measurements over three years) indicates stable rather than transient public attitudes.

Jardine et al. compiled the Central Asia Protest Tracker dataset documenting anti-Chinese protests from 2002 to 2023.[5] Their analysis identified 98 anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between January 2018 and August 2020, compared to only one protest in Tajikistan and none in Uzbekistan during the same period. Figure 4 presents the geographic and temporal distribution of anti-Chinese protests.



Picture 4: Anti-Chinese Protests in Central Asia by Country and Primary Concern (2018-2020)

Source: Jardine et al. [5]. Central Asia Protest Tracker

Picture 4. Stacked bar chart showing protest counts by country: Kazakhstan (65 total protests) - 24 labor/employment concerns, 18 land/sovereignty issues, 15 environmental concerns, 8 Xinjiang co-ethnic solidarity; Kyrgyzstan (33 total protests) - 20 mining/environmental, 8 labor/employment, 3 land issues, 2 Xinjiang co-ethnic; Tajikistan (1 protest) - 1 land issue; Uzbekistan (0 protests); Turkmenistan (0 protests). Source: Jardine et al. [5], Central Asia Protest Tracker.

The data reveals distinct geographic and thematic patterns. Kazakhstan experienced the highest absolute number of protests (65), with labor and employment concerns constituting the largest category (24 protests), followed by land and sovereignty issues (18 protests). Environmental concerns, particularly related to mining operations, generated 15 protests. Xinjiang co-ethnic solidarity protests, where families of detained Kazakhs demonstrated, accounted for 8 protests concentrated in Almaty.

Kyrgyzstan's 33 protests showed different thematic distribution, with mining and environmental concerns dominating (20 protests). The concentration of mining protests reflects the prevalence of Chinese mining operations in Kyrgyzstan and their documented environmental impacts. Labor and employment protests (8) and Xinjiang-related demonstrations (2) constituted smaller shares.

The near-absence of protests in Tajikistan (1) and the complete absence in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan requires explanation. Tajikistan's authoritarian political system severely restricts public demonstrations of any kind the CAPT dataset records only 27 total protests on all issues in Tajikistan between 2018 and 2020, compared to over 500 in Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan's absence of anti-Chinese protests despite growing Chinese presence likely reflects both authoritarian controls and genuinely lower public animosity, as suggested by higher favorability ratings in public opinion data.

Governments responded to protest pressures through legislative restrictions on Chinese economic activities rather than repressing protests alone. Table 4 documents major legislative changes limiting Chinese engagement across the region.

Table 4: Legislative Restrictions on Chinese Economic Activities (2016-2021)

Country	Year	Legislation	Primary Provisions	Stated Rationale
Kazakhstan	2016	Land Code Amendment	Temporary moratorium on foreign land sales/leases	Public security concerns
Kazakhstan	2021	Agricultural Land Law	Permanent ban on foreign ownership/use of pastures in border areas	National security, sovereignty
Kazakhstan	2019 - 2020	Foreign Labor Quota	Reduced quota by 20,000 positions; increased enforcement	Local employment priority
Kyrgyzstan	2018	Labor Migration Law Amendment	Limited foreign workers to 20% of company workforce	Local employment protection
Kyrgyzstan	2020	Investment Screening	Enhanced review for projects near borders, water sources	Environmental, sovereignty

Uzbekistan	2019	Foreign Investment Law	Increased local content requirements	Economic development
Tajikistan	Limited	None systematic	Ad hoc project reviews	N/A
Turkmenistan	N/A	None documented	Minimal foreign engagement	Neutrality policy

Sources: Vanderhill et al. [1], Primiano and Kudebayeva [6], national legislative databases

The legislative responses demonstrate governmental recognition that unrestricted Chinese economic activities threaten political stability. Kazakhstan’s land legislation evolved from a temporary 2016 moratorium following mass protests to permanent 2021 restrictions on border area land usage. The 2019-2020 foreign labor quota reductions directly addressed the visible Chinese worker presence that generated public resentment.

Kyrgyzstan’s 2018 labor law amendment represented the most stringent response, reducing permissible foreign workers from 70% to 20% of company workforces, a dramatic shift directly constraining Chinese business operations. Prior to this change, Chinese companies on BRI projects employed approximately 70% Chinese workers, creating a highly visible foreign presence without corresponding local employment benefits.[3]

Primiano and Kudebayeva documented specific BRI project implementation problems in Kazakhstan, providing detailed case studies of delays, cancellations, and modifications. Their analysis identified 21 active BRI projects in Kazakhstan as of 2021, but found that 6 additional projects had been delayed or cancelled due to local resistance, corruption scandals, or implementation failures.[6]

The Bishkek power plant modernization exemplifies implementation challenges. Commenced in 2014 with Chinese Export-Import Bank financing through a 20-year loan agreement, the project encountered corruption scandals involving high-level Kyrgyz officials by 2017. Public protests erupted, targeting both project implementation and associated corruption, with demonstrators explicitly connecting Chinese investment with elite enrichment. By 2018, Kyrgyzstan’s government was forced to investigate, ultimately leading to criminal charges against former Prime Minister Sapar Isakov. The project’s association with corruption damaged both the specific initiative and broader perceptions of Chinese engagement.

In February 2020, Kyrgyzstan cancelled the \$275 million Kyrgyz-Chinese Ata-Bashi Free Economic Zone project after sustained public protests. The Chinese partner, One Lead One (HK) Trading Limited, acknowledged that “it is not possible to work on a long-term large project in the circumstances,” explicitly citing public opposition as an insurmountable obstacle [20]. This represented a significant Chinese economic diplomacy failure, demonstrating that financial resources cannot overcome determined local resistance.

Mining operations generated particularly intense opposition. Between 2018 and 2021, more than 20 anti-Chinese protests in Kyrgyzstan targeted

Chinese mining companies operating gold and rare earth mineral extraction facilities. Communities near mining operations reported water pollution affecting drinking water and irrigation, air quality degradation from dust and chemical processing, landscape destruction from open-pit mining, lack of transparency in environmental impact assessments, corruption in mining license allocation, systematic discrimination against local job applicants in favor of Chinese workers, and inadequate financial compensation or benefit-sharing with affected communities.

Slamgazy et al. analyzed 847 articles about China in major Kazakhstani media outlets (Kazpravda, Egemen Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan Today) from 2013-2022. Their content analysis revealed that 62% of articles about high-level diplomatic meetings and cooperation agreements used positive framing, while 71% of articles about specific project implementation used critical framing. This divergence between elite diplomatic discourse and ground-level implementation coverage reflects a broader disconnect between governmental cooperation and popular skepticism [13].

Long examined Chinese-Uzbek university partnerships under BRI educational cooperation frameworks, documenting significant resource asymmetries affecting partnership dynamics [10]. Chinese partner institutions provided 85% of exchange program funding, 78% of research collaboration resources, and 92% of conference and workshop financing. Uzbek institutions contributed primarily through hosting arrangements, student recruitment, and local expertise.

This asymmetry manifested in partnership structures where Chinese institutions determined research agendas, selected collaboration topics, controlled intellectual property arrangements, and made final decisions on publication venues. Uzbek faculty and students gained access to superior laboratory facilities, research funding, and international publication opportunities, but functioned as junior partners in relationships structured around Chinese institutional priorities.

Long reports that resource asymmetries extended beyond finances to encompass technological infrastructure, international networks, and academic prestige [10]. Chinese universities' superior ranking in international assessments, established relationships with Western institutions, and access to research databases created dependencies where Uzbek institutions required Chinese partnership for international visibility and legitimacy. This pattern of unequal partnership mirrors broader economic and political asymmetries characterizing China-Central Asia relations.

The educational cooperation data also reveals concerning retention patterns. Of Central Asian students completing degrees in China, only 34% reported using Chinese language skills regularly after graduation, and only 23% maintained ongoing professional or personal connections with China beyond the first year post-graduation [3]. These low retention rates suggest that even successful educational exchanges fail to create lasting bonds or sustained Chinese cultural influence.

Kassenova and Duprey documented Chinese digital infrastructure expansion across Central Asia from 2010-2021.[4] Huawei supplied approximately 65% of 4G telecommunications equipment deployed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, 45% in Uzbekistan, 70% in Tajikistan, and limited amounts in Turkmenistan. ZTE provided additional telecommunications equipment, particularly for government and enterprise networks. Combined, Chinese companies captured 50-70% market share in telecommunications infrastructure across most of the region.

E-commerce platform penetration showed rapid growth. AliExpress registered users increased from 2.1 million Central Asian accounts in 2015 to 8.7 million by 2021, with Kazakhstan (4.2 million) and Uzbekistan (2.8 million) constituting the largest markets. Average transaction values remained modest (\$45-60 per order), but transaction frequency increased from 2.3 purchases per user annually (2015) to 6.7 purchases (2021), indicating normalization of Chinese e-commerce platforms in consumer behavior.

Digital payment systems achieved variable penetration. Alipay and WeChat Pay established merchant acceptance in major cities, particularly in tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors serving Chinese visitors and business travelers. However, adoption among local consumers remained limited due to required Chinese bank accounts and regulatory restrictions. Only 12% of Central Asian respondents in urban areas reported using Chinese digital payment systems for domestic transactions, compared to 89% using local banking apps and 34% using Russian payment systems.

Smart city technology adoption occurred primarily through government procurement. Chinese companies (Huawei, ZTE, Hikvision, Dahua) supplied surveillance cameras, traffic management systems, and integrated command centers in Astana, Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek. These systems enhanced governmental monitoring capabilities while raising civil society concerns about surveillance expansion and potential Chinese government access to sensitive data.

The findings reveal systematic patterns in Chinese soft power advantages and disadvantages relative to other external actors. China's primary advantages include: superior financial resources enabling large-scale infrastructure investment (54.80 billion USD invested 2000-2021 versus minimal Western investment), willingness to provide financing without political conditionality regarding governance or human rights, rapid project implementation timelines compared to multilateral development banks, and a comprehensive approach integrating economic, cultural, and digital engagement.

However, China faces significant disadvantages: a lack of historical and cultural familiarity compared to Russia's 150-year presence, linguistic barriers (Chinese language difficulty versus Russian fluency), an authoritarian governance model generating ambivalence rather than attraction, Xinjiang policies creating co-ethnic solidarity opposition in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, implementation quality problems undermining project legitimacy, and a visible Chinese labor presence generating resentment.

Russia maintains soft power advantages despite economic decline: linguistic dominance (Russian remains lingua franca), cultural familiarity from Soviet legacy, established educational connections, media dominance in Russian-language broadcasting, and historical relationships with regional elites. Western actors retain advantages in: educational prestige (Western universities attract top students), English language as a global opportunity gateway, technological innovation leadership, and democratic governance appeal among educated urban populations.

The data demonstrates that successful regional influence requires either deep historical roots (Russia), massive economic resources (China), or compelling alternative models (West, Turkey), with no single actor possessing all three assets simultaneously. This structural reality enables Central Asian states to exploit great power competition through multivectoral balancing strategies, extracting resources while limiting any single actor's dominance.

Discussion

The most striking finding across the reviewed literature concerns the inverse relationship between Chinese economic investment and soft power effectiveness in Central Asia. Despite China becoming the region's largest investor with bilateral trade reaching \$70 billion by 2022, public opinion data reveals declining favorability toward China in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from 2017 to 2021 [1]. This paradox fundamentally challenges conventional wisdom about economic engagement automatically translating into political influence and cultural attraction.

The map in *Picture 1* illustrates major BRI transportation corridors, energy pipelines, and economic zones connecting China with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Key border crossings include Khorgos (Kazakhstan-China), Torugart Pass (Kyrgyzstan-China), and Kulma Pass (Tajikistan-China).

Jardine et al. [5] quantify growing Sinophobic sentiments through their Central Asia Protest Tracker, documenting 98 anti-Chinese protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan between 2018 and 2020, compared to only one in Tajikistan and none in Uzbekistan. These protests centered on concerns about Chinese labor competition, environmental degradation from mining operations, land acquisitions, and treatment of co-ethnics in Xinjiang. Table 1 presents comparative data on Chinese economic engagement and public sentiment across Central Asian states.

Table 5: Chinese Economic Engagement and Public Sentiment in Central Asia (2021-2023)

Country	Chinese Trade (USD billion, 2021)	Sovereign Debt to China (% of GDP)	BRI Projects (2021)	Anti-Chinese Protests (2018-2020)	Public Concern about Land (%)	Public Concern about Debt (%)
Kazakhstan	22.5	2%	21	65	91.2	70.8
Kyrgyzstan	2.8	30%	21	33	92.4	84.5
Tajikistan	1.2	24%	4	1	N/A	N/A
Turkmenistan	8.4	2%	0	0	N/A	N/A
Uzbekistan	7.9	2%	15	0	54.3	34.0

Sources: Vanderhill et al. [1], Jardine et al. [5], AidData (2021)

The data reveals a critical disconnect: Kazakhstan, with the lowest debt exposure (2% of GDP), exhibits the highest public concern about Chinese influence, while heavily indebted Kyrgyzstan (30% of GDP) shows similar patterns. This suggests that debt concerns function as proxies for broader anxieties about sovereignty and Chinese influence rather than purely economic calculations. Uzbekistan, despite significant trade and BRI projects, shows markedly lower public concern levels, indicating that geographic and historical factors matter more than economic metrics alone.

Primiano and Kudebayeva provide micro-level evidence through surveys of Kazakhstani university students, revealing that approximately 70% expressed concerns about Chinese land purchases and 68% worried about debt dependency, even while acknowledging China’s economic importance.[8] This demonstrates that Central Asian publics distinguish between transactional economic relationships and deeper forms of attraction. They simultaneously appreciate Chinese investment in infrastructure while deeply distrusting Chinese intentions and resisting cultural influence.

The contrast with Russia proves instructive. Vanderhill et al. note that even after Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the vast majority of Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani respondents maintained favorable views of Russia. Russia’s soft power advantages stem from 150 years of accumulated cultural capital, including shared Soviet history, linguistic ties (Russian remains the lingua franca), educational systems, media dominance, and cultural familiarity, resources that China cannot replicate through two decades of intensive investment.[1]

Islomova [2] argues that China’s soft power strategy relies heavily on state-directed initiatives, such as Confucius Institutes, government-sponsored cultural events, and controlled media outlets, rather than organic cultural appeal. This top-down approach, while allowing rapid resource deployment, lacks the authenticity and grassroots legitimacy that characterize effective soft power. When Central Asians engage with Chinese culture through Confucius Institutes, they perceive government propaganda rather than genuine cultural exchange, fundamentally undermining the attraction that Nye identified as central to soft power.

The economic asymmetry between China (GDP of \$17.79 trillion) and Central Asian states (combined GDP under \$450 billion in 2023) creates inherent power imbalances. This disparity means that projects representing minor Chinese investments constitute major economic events for recipient countries, creating dependency relationships that constrain policy autonomy. Central Asian populations increasingly view Chinese engagement as neocolonial extraction rather than a mutually beneficial partnership, regardless of official rhetoric about win-win cooperation.

The literature reveals stark geographic variations in receptivity to Chinese soft power, with border states exhibiting systematically more negative responses. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which share borders with China, show sustained anti-Chinese sentiment manifested in protests, legislation restricting Chinese activities, and declining public opinion. Vanderhill et al. theorize this through two mechanisms: historical territorial disputes and co-ethnic populations across borders.[1]

Historical land conflicts create deep-seated anxieties. When Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became independent in 1991, they inherited contested borders with China, claiming 2,235 square kilometers in Kazakhstan, 3,728 square kilometers in Kyrgyzstan, and 28,430 square kilometers in Tajikistan. While officially settled through bilateral agreements involving Central Asian territorial concessions, collective memories remain politically salient. The 2020 Sohu.com article claiming Kazakhstan was “historically part of China” triggered immediate diplomatic protests, demonstrating how territorial sensitivity shapes official reactions.

These anxieties manifest in contemporary mobilization around land issues. The 2016 protests in Kazakhstan against land reform legislation drew thousands chanting, “We can't give land to the Chinese. If they come, then they won't leave!” Subsequent restrictions on foreign land ownership in border areas demonstrate how historical territorial concerns translate into concrete policy constraints. Public opinion data confirms that concerns about Chinese land acquisitions (89-94% in Kazakhstan, 86-93% in Kyrgyzstan) consistently exceed debt concerns. [1]

The co-ethnic dimension adds complexity. Shakhanova [9] provides a nuanced analysis through interviews with Kazakh repatriates from Xinjiang, revealing that while they support economic cooperation, they show no interest in broader Chinese culture and remain silent on Xinjiang's detention camps, which is interpreted as strategic self-protection. The treatment of co-ethnics emerged as a major soft power liability after 2018, when international attention focused on China's detention of up to two million Muslims, including ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

Vanderhill et al. [1] document 13 protest cases in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan connected specifically to Xinjiang detention camps between 2018-2020. Organizations like Atazhurt mobilized families of detainees, creating

sustained pressure. More than 4,500 ethnic Kazakhs fled Xinjiang to Kazakhstan in 2019 alone, bringing firsthand accounts that circulated widely through social media. Central Asian governments faced acute dilemmas: public pressure to defend co-ethnics conflicted with economic dependence on China. Governments largely responded with repression of protesters rather than diplomatic pressure on China, creating a disconnect between public sentiment and official policy.

The geographic variation extends to economic positioning. Uzbekistan, with its larger population (36.4 million) and more diversified economy, maintains greater independence compared to smaller states. Jardine et al. note that Uzbek public opinion remained relatively positive until 2018, then declined following President Mirziyoyev's 2016 policy pivot toward deeper Chinese engagement. This suggests that rapid increases in Chinese influence, even from low baselines, trigger public backlash when populations perceive excessive accommodation [5].

Confucius Institutes represent China's most visible cultural investment, yet Central Asian experiences reveal fundamental limitations. Islomova documents 13 institutes enrolling 22,270 students, while Ziyatova [3] notes over 15,000 Central Asians studying in China. Despite impressive scale, multiple factors constrain impact [2].

The inherent difficulty of the Chinese language creates natural barriers. Islomova cites expert observations that students initially believe "knowledge of the language will provide economic advantages," but learning difficulties, limited job opportunities requiring Chinese, and English's continuing dominance reduce long-term commitment. Unlike Russian, absorbed from childhood through media and daily interaction, Chinese requires intensive study with limited practical application outside specific sectors [2].

The state-controlled nature fundamentally undermines credibility. Unlike Western cultural institutions, maintaining operational independence, Confucius Institutes operate under Hanban, a Ministry of Education organization with explicit political objectives. Curricula emphasize Chinese civilization's greatness and developmental model superiority messages, reinforcing perceptions of cultural chauvinism rather than fostering appreciation. Students seeking practical language skills encounter courses on Confucian philosophy and Communist Party achievements, creating a disconnect between interests and institutional priorities.

Dadparvar and Azizi examine how China promotes Confucian values, yet the emphasis on ancient philosophy provides limited relevance to contemporary Central Asian concerns. Content focuses on China's cultural heritage rather than engaging substantively with Central Asian cultures, positioning Chinese culture as transmitted and Central Asian cultures as passive recipients. This asymmetric orientation contradicts the mutual respect that effective cultural diplomacy requires [1].

Timing and political context significantly affected effectiveness. Ziyatova identifies enrollment peaks around 2011-2014, predating the official 2013 BRI announcement, suggesting genuine interest in China's rising economy initially

drove growth.[3] However, as BRI projects encountered problems with corruption scandals, environmental damage, labor disputes, and awareness of Xinjiang detention camps spread after 2018, enthusiasm declined despite continued operations and scholarship availability. Correlation between negative news and declining enrollment demonstrates how vulnerabilities in one domain undermine effectiveness in another.

Russia's cultural dominance remains stark. Russian functions as the default second language and cultural reference point after three Soviet generations. Educational systems follow Russian models, and cultural references remain predominantly Russian. China's attempt to build comparable influence within two decades confronts accumulated advantages that institutional creation cannot overcome. Moreover, Western and other influences maintain strong appeal. English proficiency opens global opportunities, Turkish television dramas enjoy massive popularity, Korean pop culture attracts devoted followings, and American entertainment dominates preferences. Confucius Institutes compete not only with Russian hegemony but also with diverse global cultural flows. Kassenova and Duprey [4] comprehensively analyze these challenges and opportunities, concluding that while China's soft power policy toward Central Asia faces significant obstacles, including linguistic barriers, authoritarian governance perceptions, and Russian cultural dominance, opportunities exist in educational cooperation, technological partnerships, and pragmatic economic engagement that prioritizes mutual benefits over ideological alignment.

Economic activities generate soft power challenges rather than advantages, revealing fundamental tensions. Table 6 presents data on BRI project implementation and local responses across the region.

Table 6: BRI Implementation and Local Resistance in Central Asia (2014-2023)

Country	Total BRI Investment (USD billion)	Projects Completed	Projects Delayed / Cancelled	Legislative Restrictions Enacted	Foreign Labor Quota Reduction	Mining Protests
Kazakhstan	12.07	15	6	Yes (2016, 2021)	20,000 workers (2019-2020)	8
Kyrgyzstan	2.11	12	9	Yes (2018)	70% to 20% limit	20+
Tajikistan	0.32	3	1	Limited	Limited data	2
Turkmenistan	0	0	0	No	N/A	0
Uzbekistan	3.08	10	5	Limited	Moderate	1

Sources: Primiano & Kudebayeva [6], Jardine et al. [5], Vanderhill et al. [1]

The data reveals striking patterns. Kyrgyzstan shows the highest rate of project delays/cancellations (43%) and most mining protests (20+), while Kazakhstan implemented significant legislative restrictions despite lower debt exposure. This demonstrates that local resistance stems from implementation problems rather than debt levels per se.

Debt concerns feature prominently but do not fully explain outcomes. Maracchione and Jardine B [10] argue that China's development-oriented soft power strategy in Central Asia prioritizes economic infrastructure investment as the foundation for long-term influence, viewing debt relationships as tools for sustained engagement rather than purely financial transactions. Tajikistan, with debt to China accounting for 80% of external debt increases (2007-2016), faces acute vulnerability. Elite statements reflect anxiety. Kyrgyz President Japarov warned in 2021 that payment failures would result in asset losses. However, Kazakhstan's low debt exposure (2%) and high anti-Chinese sentiment demonstrate that debt functions as a proxy for broader sovereignty anxieties.

Labor issues prove particularly contentious. Ziyatova examines how Chinese migration theoretically serves as a soft power tool through people-to-people connections.[3] This strategy backfired spectacularly, as local populations view Chinese workers as unfair competition. Prior to legislative changes, Chinese companies employed up to 70% Chinese workers on BRI projects, creating a visible presence without local employment benefits. The 2019 Bishkek protest drew 500 people demanding Chinese workers "go home," while Zhanaozen demonstrations called for ending Chinese projects entirely.

Governments responded with restrictions rather than defending Chinese interests. Kyrgyzstan amended its foreign labor law in 2018, limiting foreign workers to 20% of workforces. Kazakhstan reduced foreign worker quotas by 20,000 and increased enforcement. These legal changes directly constrain Chinese operations and signal that an unconstrained Chinese presence threatens stability more than restrictions threaten growth.

Investment projects generate similar tensions. Primiano and Kudebayeva document the "bumpy ride" of BRI projects. Bishkek's power plant modernization, commenced in 2014, led to corruption scandals and mass protests.[6]. In February 2020, Kyrgyzstan canceled a \$275 million logistics project after protests, with Chinese contractors noting "it is not possible to work on long-term projects in these circumstances." This represents a significant defeat for Chinese economic diplomacy.

Mining operations prove especially controversial. Between 2018 and 2021, more than 20 anti-Chinese protests in Kyrgyzstan targeted mining companies. Communities complained about environmental degradation, lack of transparency, corruption, discrimination against local applicants, and inadequate benefit-sharing. These grievances reflect implementation failures, and Chinese companies' inability to meet local expectations for corporate social responsibility undermines legitimacy.

Long extends analysis to educational cooperation, examining resource asymmetries in Chinese-Uzbek university partnerships. Chinese institutions dominate through superior funding and infrastructure, creating unequal partnerships where Uzbek institutions function as junior partners [10]. This asymmetry pattern pervades China's engagement across sectors, trade,

investment, education, and culture, consistently positioning Central Asians as recipients rather than equal partners.

Digital dimensions represent emerging aspects of Chinese engagement. Kassenova and Duprey analyze the “Digital Silk Road,” examining telecommunications infrastructure, e-commerce platforms, digital payment systems, and surveillance technology. Chinese companies, particularly Huawei, ZTE, Alibaba, and Tencent, established dominant positions through competitive pricing and attractive financing [7].

This digital presence creates opportunities distinct from traditional cultural diplomacy. E-commerce platforms provide access to affordable goods while normalizing Chinese technological interfaces. Digital payment systems facilitate trade. Smart city technologies promise improved services. These practical utilities generate positive associations with Chinese technology regardless of attitudes toward China. “Utility-based influence” differs from attraction-based soft power, potentially proving more durable.

However, significant concerns create vulnerabilities. Data sovereignty emerges as a critical issue given that Chinese equipment potentially provides Beijing access to sensitive data. China's 2017 National Intelligence Law requires companies to cooperate with state intelligence services, leading policymakers to worry that cooperation enables surveillance. Concerns intensified after 2022 when Western sanctions on Russia demonstrated how digital dependencies become coercion instruments.

Technological dependency creates strategic vulnerabilities. As countries increasingly rely on Chinese infrastructure for critical services, telecommunications, financial systems, and government operations, their ability to pursue policies Beijing opposes diminishes. Digital infrastructure proves more difficult to replace than trade relationships, creating “lock-in” effects. The export of surveillance technology raises human rights concerns, damaging soft power among civil society, even as it appeals to authoritarian governments seeking social control tools.

Maracchione and Jardine's analysis of 10,563 Chinese academic publications challenges Western assumptions about Chinese knowledge production. Their Structural Topic Model reveals that security themes prove equally or more significant than economic topics, with security topics showing the highest prevalence before 2013 during periods when Western analysts portrayed China's interests as predominantly economic. Topics on terrorism, Afghanistan spillover effects, and political stability peaked in the late 1990s and early 2000s, corresponding to actual regional challenges rather than following BRI publicity.

The analysis reveals unexpected attention to Central Asian internal politics. Topic 39 on Central Asian political institutions ranks ninth in overall prevalence, encompassing research on regional elites, political parties, democratic transitions, and governance systems. Research demonstrates engagement with local nuances, such as Yang Jin's (2014) analysis of democratic transition constraints, focusing

entirely on internal dynamics without connecting to Chinese policy considerations. This attention likely stems from practical learning following early implementation problems; academic communities developed expertise informing more effective engagement strategies.

However, significant limitations reflect political constraints. Research in the humanities remains largely Sinocentric, focusing on Chinese culture and language rather than engaging substantively with Central Asian cultures on their own terms. The most prevalent topic concerns teaching Chinese to Central Asians, a fundamentally asymmetric orientation. Politically sensitive topics receive limited attention, and research on Xinjiang policies remains sparse and supportive of government narratives when present. Color revolutions appear primarily regarding regime security rather than analyzing democratic aspirations sympathetically.

The geographic distribution reveals important patterns. While research hubs exist in Xinjiang, the most prolific researchers concentrate in Beijing institutions connected to the State Council, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China Institute for International Studies, Development Research Centre. This centralization may enhance policy relevance but potentially reduce engagement with border region perspectives and local knowledge.

Understanding China's challenges requires situating efforts within broader competition involving Russia, the West, and Turkey. Russia's enduring advantages stem from structural factors that China cannot replicate Soviet legacy includes shared language, educational systems, cultural references, and institutional frameworks. Beyond structural advantages, Russia maintains active projection through media dominance, educational opportunities, and cultural programming.

The Ukraine war's impact proves complex. Nourzhanov et al. document that while Kazakhstan showed declining favorability toward Russia in 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan maintained high positive sentiment.[11] This suggests Russia's January 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan affected perceptions more than the Ukraine invasion itself. Central Asian governments uniformly avoided condemning Russia, demonstrating continued influence despite aggression. However, Russia's economic weakness creates opportunities for Chinese expansion. Russian trade now ranks below that of China in most countries, and investment capacity pales compared to Chinese resources.

Western soft power faces different challenges rooted in limited engagement. The US and EU lack historical ties or economic resources but offer alternative governance models, education, and culture, maintaining appeal among younger, urban, educated populations. English proficiency opens global opportunities, creating strong incentives despite limited Western institutional presence. However, Western soft power suffers from inconsistency and perceived hypocrisy. The 2005 Andijan massacre response, where Western reactions proved muted because Uzbekistan hosted a US military base, demonstrated that values take second place to security interests when conflicts arise.

Turkey represents an important alternative often overlooked. Turkey shares linguistic ties, religious commonality, and cultural affinity with Turkic Central Asian states. Turkish educational institutions, media outlets, and cultural programs provide another reference point. However, Turkey's democratic backsliding under Erdoğan and limited economic resources constrain potential. Turkish influence remains significant in cultural and educational domains, while limited in economic and security spheres.

The Central Asian case provides important insights for soft power theory. China demonstrates that authoritarian systems can rapidly deploy extensive infrastructure through centralized decision-making and massive resources. However, the research confirms Nye's insight that soft power ultimately depends on attraction rather than resources. China's extensive infrastructure fails to generate proportional influence because top-down approaches undermine authenticity. When Confucius Institutes promote culture while Beijing suppresses Uyghur culture in Xinjiang, contradictions undermine credibility.

The case demonstrates that economic interdependence and soft power operate through different mechanisms. China achieves economic influence through trade, investment, and debt, creating tangible dependencies. However, material dependencies do not translate into cultural attraction. Central Asians may need Chinese investment while disliking influence, creating compliance without partnership, leverage without legitimacy. This distinction between coercive power and soft power proves crucial for understanding China's actual capacity and limitations.

The research reveals how domestic repression generates international costs. China's Xinjiang policies create direct damage by threatening co-ethnic populations. More broadly, authoritarianism signals that China does not view partners as equals but as targets for manipulation. This perception fundamentally undermines attraction regardless of economic benefits, creating deficits that financial inducements cannot compensate.

Conclusion

This study examined the paradox of Chinese soft power in Central Asia, where massive Belt and Road Initiative investments correlate with declining rather than increasing influence. Through systematic review of 20 scholarly works published between 2019 and 2025, the research documented comprehensive evidence demonstrating that despite \$54.8 billion in Chinese investment and extensive cultural diplomacy including 13 Confucius Institutes, public favorability toward China declined significantly in Kazakhstan (44% to 33%, 2017-2021) and Kyrgyzstan (41% to 31%), while 98 anti-Chinese protests occurred between 2018 and 2020.

The findings reveal systematic patterns explaining this paradox. China's state-directed soft power approach undermines authenticity despite massive resource deployment. Implementation failures-corruption scandals, environmental

damage, labor disputes-damage credibility and trigger legislative restrictions rather than gratitude. Xinjiang policies generate co-ethnic solidarity opposition in border states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) that possess historical territorial grievances, while non-border states (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) demonstrate greater tolerance. Confucius Institutes enroll thousands of students but fail to generate genuine cultural attraction due to perceived propaganda purposes, linguistic barriers, and Russia's enduring cultural dominance accumulated over 150 years.

Theoretically, the research extends Nye's soft power framework to authoritarian contexts, demonstrating structural limitations on state-directed attraction efforts regardless of resource availability. The integration with balance of power theory illuminates how Central Asian states engage in soft balancing—extracting economic benefits while constraining political influence through legislative restrictions and toleration of anti-Chinese protests. These findings challenge assumptions about economic interdependence automatically translating into political influence, revealing that material dependencies create compliance without partnership and leverage without legitimacy. Future research should address Central Asian agency and counter-strategies, undertake longitudinal studies spanning decades, and conduct cross-regional comparative analyses to deepen understanding of authoritarian soft power projection in multipolar contexts.

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ТАРТЫМДЫЛЫҚСЫЗ ИНВЕСТИЦИЯЛАР ПАРАДОКСЫ: ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ҚЫТАЙДЫҢ ЖҰМСАҚ КҮШІНІҢ ҚИЫНДЫҚТАРЫ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу Орталық Азиядағы Қытайдың жұмсақ күшінің парадоксын қарастырады, мұнда «Белдеу және жол» бастамасының ауқымды инвестициялары әсердің өсуімен емес, керісінше, төмендеуімен байланысты. 2019-2025 жылдар аралығында жарияланған 20 ғылыми еңбекті жүйелі талдау арқылы зерттеу Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан, Түркіменстан және Өзбекстандағы экономикалық ынтымақтастық, мәдени бастамалар, қоғамдық пікір үрдістері және іске асыру қиындықтары бойынша эмпирикалық дәлелдерді синтездейді. 54,8 миллиард долларлық қытайлық инвестициялар және 13 Конфуций институтын қоса алғанда кең көлемді мәдени дипломатияға қарамастан, Қазақстандағы Қытайға қолайлы көзқарас айтарлықтай төмендеді (44%-дан 33%-ға дейін, 2017-2021), ал

Қырғызстанда (41%-дан 31%-ға дейін), 2018-2020 жылдар аралығында 98 қытайға қарсы наразылық акциялары болды. Талдау мемлекеттік бағытталған жұмсақ күш тәсілдерінің шынайылықты бұзатынын, іске асырудағы сәтсіздіктердің беделге нұқсан келтіретінін, Шыңжаң саясатының шекаралас мемлекеттерде этникалық ынтымақтастық оппозициясын тудыратынын және қытайлық жұмыс күшінің көрінуі экономикалық пайдаларға қарамастан наразылық тудыратынын көрсетеді. Джозеф Найдның жұмсақ күш теориясы мен реалистік күш тепе-теңдігі теориясын қолдана отырып, зерттеу Орталық Азия мемлекеттері автономияны сақтау үшін қытайлық қызметке заңнамалық шектеулер енгізе отырып, экономикалық ынтымақтастықты қабылдайтын жұмсақ тепе-теңдікпен айналысатынын көрсетеді. Географиялық вариация жүйелі болып табылады: шекаралас мемлекеттер (Қазақстан, Қырғызстан, Тәжікстан) тарихи аумақтық дауларға және Шыңжаңдағы бір этностық халыққа байланысты тұрақты қарсылық көрсетеді, ал шекаралас емес мемлекеттер үлкен төзімділік көрсетеді. Нәтижелер экономикалық өзара байланыстылықтың саяси әсерге айналуы туралы болжамдарға қарсы шығады, авторитарлық жұмсақ күш проекциясының құрылымдық шектеулерін ашады.

Тірек сөздер: Қытай, Орталық Азия, жұмсақ күш, Белдеу және жол бастамасы, қоғамдық пікір, Конфуций институттары, экономикалық әсер, күш тепе-теңдігі

Қаржыландыру: Осы ғылыми зерттеу Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі Ғылым комитетінің AP26100745 «„Жұмсақ күш“ әлемнің жетекші орталықтарының (АҚШ, Ресей, ЕО, Қытай, Иран және Түркия) Орталық Азия елдеріндегі сыртқы саясатын жүзеге асыру құралы ретінде» жобасы аясында қаржыландырылды.

ПАРАДОКС ИНВЕСТИЦИЙ БЕЗ ПРИВЛЕКАТЕЛЬНОСТИ: ВЫЗОВЫ КИТАЙСКОЙ МЯГКОЙ СИЛЫ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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Аннотация. Данное исследование рассматривает парадокс китайской мягкой силы в Центральной Азии, где масштабные инвестиции в рамках инициативы «Пояс и путь» коррелируют не с ростом, а со снижением влияния. Посредством систематического обзора литературы 20 научных работ, опубликованных в 2019-2025 годах, исследование синтезирует эмпирические данные об экономическом взаимодействии, культурных инициативах, тенденциях общественного мнения и проблемах реализации в Казахстане, Кыргызстане, Таджикистане, Туркменистане и Узбекистане. Несмотря на китайские инвестиции в размере 54,8 миллиарда долларов и обширную культурную дипломатию, включая 13 институтов Конфуция, благосклонность к Китаю значительно снизилась в Казахстане (с 44%

до 33%, 2017-2021) и Кыргызстане (с 41% до 31%), при этом в 2018-2020 годах произошло 98 антикитайских протестов. Анализ показывает, что государственно-направленные подходы к мягкой силе подрывают аутентичность, неудачи реализации наносят ущерб авторитету, синьцзянская политика порождает оппозицию этнической солидарности в приграничных государствах, а видимое присутствие китайской рабочей силы вызывает негодование, несмотря на экономические выгоды. Используя теорию мягкой силы Джозефа Ная и реалистическую теорию баланса сил, исследование демонстрирует, что центральноазиатские государства занимаются мягким балансированием-принимая экономическое сотрудничество, одновременно вводя законодательные ограничения на китайскую деятельность для сохранения автономии. Географическая вариация оказывается систематической: приграничные государства (Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан) демонстрируют устойчивое сопротивление из-за исторических территориальных споров и этнических групп в Синьцзяне, в то время как неприграничные государства проявляют большую терпимость. Результаты опровергают предположения о том, что экономическая взаимозависимость трансформируется в политическое влияние, раскрывая структурные ограничения авторитарной проекции мягкой силы.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Центральная Азия, мягкая сила, инициатива Пояс и путь, общественное мнение, институты Конфуция, экономическое влияние, баланс сил

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