Kazakhstan's media coverage of China: How the Belt and Road Initiative strengthens geopolitical ties

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the portrayal of China in Kazakhstani media, focusing on changes in perceptions before and during the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through comparative discourse analysis, the research reveals a shift in media narratives from primarily economic and political aspects to a growing emphasis on fostering friendly relations between Kazakhstan and China. The paper also explores how diplomatic relations between the two countries influence media reports about China. Although the findings are specific to Kazakhstan, the study contributes to understanding Central Asian views on China, especially in the context of the BRI and the region's changing geopolitical dynamics. The research suggests a trend toward more positive and neutral coverage of China in Kazakhstani news outlets.

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have compared the Chinese and Kazakh projects currently underway in the Central Asian region, namely the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which seek to increase integration with Central Asian states. However, little attention has been paid to how these endeavors are perceived locally by Central Asians themselves. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an international project, calls for an open and inclusive model of sustainable international economic, political, and cultural cooperation and development based on the tenets of sovereign

state peace and financed by new multilateral financial instruments. This paper examines how the Kazakhstani press reported on the BRI about China's image in Kazakhstan from 2008 to 2018, i.e., before and during the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI started in 2013, and the Sino-Kazakhstan partnership is the oldest. Three of Kazakhstan's largest circulation print newspapers were chosen for content analysis: Egemen Qazaqstan [Independent Kazakhstan] and Turkistan, both in Kazakh, and Liter, published in the Russian language.

The formation of a nation's national image results from a complex historical process that involves the interaction of several variables, including that nation's political and social realities, diplomatic relations, and any other shifts in global economic and political spheres. Symbolic portrayals in the media and popular culture also contribute to the country's perception. As people rely more and more on what they see, hear, and read in the news, television, drama series, commercials, radio broadcasts, and online, among those factors and others, mass media is crucial in forming a country's perception. Unquestionably, the media plays a significant role in today's society. Books, magazines, and newspapers are among the oldest mediums in society, and in any region, the tradition of creating an image through newspapers has evolved over the years.

The image of China in Kazakhstan is also generally portrayed through the media, specifically through what the newspapers produce, whether printed or online. China uses the concept of image to further its foreign policy objectives. As the second-largest economy in the world, China, has a most excellent chance of affecting international relations. Numerous observers have noticed China's escalating influence on the global scene and it "charm offensive" in various world regions in recent years, as it has made significant investments to increase its level of soft power and reshape its overall national image (Shambaugh, 2015).

Few scholars have investigated the portrayal of China in Kazakhstani media, with most studies focusing on China-Kazakh relations centering around economic investment, trade, and migration. Following the announcement of the Belt and Road initiative, many scholars explored how China is perceived in Kazakhstan. For instance, Elena Sadovskaya (2013) and Chen and Jiménez-Tovar (2017) provided insights into the perceptions of the Kazakhstani people regarding China.

While, on a state level, the two countries are considered good neighbors, with President Xi Jinping emphasizing their potential to set an example for others, the portrayal of China and its projects by the media, often referred to as the fourth estate, remains uncertain. Consequently, this study investigates how China is represented in Kazakhstani media and how diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and China influence reports about China.

This research is intended to provide a synchronic snapshot of the volume and thematic types of articles associated with Kazakhstan and China that are likely to be digested by political and cultural elites in Kazakhstan. Because the five post-Soviet Central Asian states have very differing relations with China, the findings showcased below cannot be extended beyond Kazakhstan without further research. However, this paper aims to build on a similar analysis of Kazakhstani media and contribute to constructing a bigger picture of contemporary Central Asian views of China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Representation

Media representation shapes the identity of individuals, communities, and countries by portraying concepts and images. This influential role in constructing identities is underscored by Iwashita (2006), who emphasized the media's significant impact on promoting and solidifying artificially created identities.

According to Wright (2002), the media's framing of concepts related to any group greatly influences public perception. Taylor (1997) further described the media as a psychological weapon both domestically and internationally. Government departments and officials utilize mass media channels to convey policies, shape public opinion, and enable the evaluation of international society. Alexander and Levin (2005) highlighted how a nation's perception of other shapes views held by other countries, influencing potential relations such as cooperation or conflict. This understanding is crucial in international affairs, as was acknowledged by McCracken (1987).

Given that most individuals do not engage in international travel, the media's role in shaping perceptions of other countries, including China and its involvement in the BRI, is paramount. McNelly and Izcaray (1986) noted that mass media can contribute to either fostering understanding or perpetuating misunderstanding between nations. In this context, media representations of the BRI and China's role in it can significantly influence public attitudes toward China and its global initiatives.

Both China and partner countries like Kazakhstan recognize the significance of media in shaping public opinion and garnering support for their respective agendas. This underscores the interconnectedness of media representation, international relations, and public perception in the context of the BRI and China's global engagement efforts.

The Dynamics of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global infrastructure and development initiative initiated by China in 2013. The primary objective of the BRI is to enhance trade and connectivity among nations spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, and its vision intends to promote globalization and regional collaboration among countries, especially developing ones. It has been assessed that over half of China's overseas projects have come from the BRI economies, and the accumulated investment is estimated to be USD 1 trillion. Since its inception, the BRI has undergone various changes, including expanding geographical coverage, diversifying projects, increasing private sector involvement, heightened monitoring, and integrating with other global efforts. These developments have been identified through various studies conducted in different countries. For instance, some scholars have found that the BRI serves two purposes: it has enabled China to export its surplus production capacity and has allowed developing countries to utilize it.

Furthermore, the initiative is expected to improve infrastructure for international trade, particularly benefiting Chinese exporters by reducing transportation costs (Zhai, 2018). In addition to these external objectives, the BRI also addresses China's internal needs. The country's high domestic demand for international commodities, especially energy and agriculture, necessitates a robust transportation infrastructure. Developing such infrastructure under the BRI is crucial for China to diversify its supply chains in these sectors (Zou et al., 2020).

Progress from the BRI has been driven by internal and external factors in China's economy. Because China is transforming its economy from a domestic construction-focused model to an innovation-driven model, an internal factor (and challenging risk) is dealing with industrial overcapacity. Externally, there is an urgent global demand for infrastructure, and the shortage of international production capacity for infrastructure and the financial stress this causes is real. For example, in 2017, Asian countries had a demand of USD 1.7 trillion for infrastructure, but the shortage in financing was USD 800 billion, according to the Asian Development Bank (2017). The existing scholarly discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, has predominantly focused on material aspects such as terrestrial routes, pipelines traversing Kazakh lands, and the alignment of the BRI with the Kazakh state program "Nurly Zhol." Scholars such as Bitabarova (2018), Cooley (2016), Usman (2019), and Peyrouse (2017) have contributed to this body of work by adopting a norm-oriented approach. These studies delved into the tangible implications and economic cooperation between China and Kazakhstan.

In addition to economic dimensions, researchers also have explored the sociopolitical landscape, investing in Sinophile and Sinophobe groups within the public domain. Peyrouse's (2016) examination of Sinophile and Sinophobe sentiments in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, revealed a nuanced perspective on China's influence. The study highlighted the coexistence of positive and negative attitudes within individuals, with business communities experiencing complex beliefs influenced by commercial interactions with China. Intellectual circles have engaged in debates reflecting ideological orientations, with pro-Sino-Russian alliances favoring the Russian model. Still unfamiliar with China, public opinion shows more significant interest in its socio-demographic situation than its culture. Sinophobia sentiments have grown over the years, driven by concerns about product quality, the "yellow peril," and incidents targeting

Chinese traders. Nationalist circles have exploited sinophobia to counter perceived threats to identity from Chinese migrants. Clarke (2014) investigate the prevalent 'phobia' in Kazakhstan regarding the potential demographic expansion of China into Central Asia, attibuting this fear to a convergence of factors, including the legacy of Sino-Soviet split-era propaganda, Chinese territorial claims in the 1990s, developments in Xinjiang, and Russian views of China. Contrastingly, Chen and Jiménez-Tovar's (2017) study among Kazakhstani students presented a different narrative, perceiving China as wielding the most significant influence in the region, and anticipating a decline in Russia's influence, with China poised to surpass it in the next decade.

Over the past several decades, China, as the second-largest economy in the world, has contributed a significant portion of the growth of the world economy and has built robust connections with other economies. After decades of rapid growth that relied on extensive use of natural resources and low-cost migrant workers, its economy has been transforming into a more sustainable and technology-focused growth model (Zhang & Chen, 2017). Meanwhile, relationships with China and shaped by these sentiments have evolved based on temporal, relational, and objective considerations, reflecting the collective views of Central Asians on the changes they have been undergoing in the past two decades. This nuanced understanding of public sentiment adds a sociocultural layer to examining the BRI's impact on Kazakhstan, enriching the scholarly discourse beyond purely economic considerations.

Insights gained from García-Herrero's (2018) study highlight Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa as regions with notably positive perceptions of the BRI. This positivity is rooted in China's longstanding relationships with these regions, predating the formal inception of the BRI. However, Kassenova (2017) introduced a divergence in public opinion among Kazakhs, revealing that while political elites expressed support for closer ties with China, ordinary citizens harbored increasing concerns. Public discourse, shaped by talks of a "China threat," extended beyond security matters to encompass the trajectory of the country's future.

Addressing fear and uncertainty, often stemming from a lack of information within society, becomes crucial. Vakulchuk (2019) emphasized the imperative for Chinese actors to engage in proactive information campaigns extending beyond local elites to reach the broader public. This is particularly crucial as findings have indicated minimal changes in the perception of China in Central Asia since the announcement of the BRI in 2013. Local authorities have been characterized as passive and unsystematic in informing the public about ongoing projects with China. Dave (2018) echoed this sentiment, highlighting the persistent under-informed status of the Central Asian population regarding China's activities and the specifics of the BRI.

The relationship between Kazakhstan, China, and other Central Asian republics has been marked by discord, reflected in both governmental discourse and everyday interethnic interactions. Chinese residents in Central Asia have often encountered prejudice and violence, leading to protests against Chinese investments despite official claims of "expanding strategic relationships" (Owen, 2018). Misconceptions about China in Central Asia stem from factors like media exposure, purchasing Chinese goods, and educational exchanges. Language plays a key role in shaping perceptions, with Burkhanov and Chen (2016) noting differing views in Kazakh and Russian languages. State-sponsored media in both languages generally portray China positively, aligning with national policies favoring engagement with the PRC. However, skepticism and sinophobia are more prevalent in private media, particularly in Kazakh-language outlets. This mistrust is rooted in limited direct contact and understanding between the Chinese and Kazakhstanis. Huang (2018) examined the use of Chinese soft power in Kazakhstan, including media coverage and found that Kazakhstanis generally have a favorable view of China, but there are concerns about the potential negative impact of Chinese investment on Kazakhstan's economy and sovereignty. The study also found that the Chinese media is viewed with suspicion by some Kazakhstanis, who feel that it is biased in favor of China.

Within the realm of scholarly discourse on the BRI, considerable attention has been directed toward its intersection with the Eurasian

Economic Union (EAEU) and the dynamics of China-Russia relations. The relationship between these two nations, often characterized as a partnership, has fostered a growing trade connection (Megits, 2016). Samokhvalov (2018) contributed to this dialogue by examining regional rivalries, particularly the EU–-Russian competition in the Black Sea region and Central Asia's Chinese–Russian dynamic. The absence of overt confrontation between China and Russia in Central Asia, as noted by Samokhvalov, is attributed to the perceived insignificance of the region to Russian identity and China's diplomatic caution. Scharnberg et al. (2020) further deepened this understanding by comprehensively assessing the BRI's implementation in Kazakhstan, exploring its potential implications for Russian hegemony in Central Asia. Drawing on neo-Gramscianism and neoliberal institutionalism, the authors suggested a notable shift in regional hegemony, proposing that China, bolstered by the strengthening of the BRI, could emerge as a hegemon shaping the 'forms of state' in Kazakhstan. Ohle, Cook, and Han's (2020) research delved into the complex geopolitical dynamics involving Kazakhstan, Russia, and China, centering on the BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Kazakhstan's nuanced diplomatic approach, aligning with Russia while strategically recognizing China for additional benefits, underscored its diplomatic agility. The study emphasized the intensified commitments within the SCO, where Russia's membership initiates an institutional hedging dynamic marked by a checks-and-balances pattern. The evolving security sphere raises questions about China's potential leverage over Kazakhstan, particularly in the arms industry. Despite China's growing military expenditures, Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian arms sales indicates enduring security linkages, with China's commitments viewed as supplementary. Their study underscored the need for comprehensive cross-border security cooperation to address regional secessionism effectively. Collectively, these works have contributed richly to our understanding of Central Asia's geopolitical landscape, diplomatic strategies, and security dynamics within the context of the BRI.

The ongoing debate surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative project is multi-faceted, with various perspectives shaping its global reception.

On one hand, some Western media have labeled the Chinese-backed infrastructure projects as "debt traps" or "infrastructure bait." This viewpoint suggests that these projects could lead to unsustainable debt levels for participating countries, potentially allowing China to establish a Sino-centric geopolitical order (Van Noort, 2021). On the other hand, many countries in the Global South perceive China's involvement more positively. The BRI presents a strategic opportunity for these nations to enhance infrastructure and stimulate local economic growth. A case in point is Indonesia, which, in 2023, launched its advanced high-speed railway, a project funded with more than USD 7 billion from BRI investments. This bullet train, which can reach up to 350 km/h and stretches over 140 km, attracts international travelers and appeals to business investors seeking economic productivity. Furthermore, the railway is anticipated to positively impact Indonesia's carbon footprint, a significant concern as the country becomes a key economic player in the region. This development exemplifies the potential benefits of the BRI projects in supporting economic and infrastructural advancement in developing countries (Cai, 2023).

Scholarly exploration of the Belt and Road Initiative coverage in Kazakhstani media is a burgeoning field, with existing analyses primarily focusing on the implications of the BRI projects for the bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and China. While considerable attention has been given to understanding the tangible outcomes and diplomatic consequences of the BRI in the region, more research is still needed concerning how China and the BRI are portrayed within the Kazakhstani media landscape. The limited attention to this aspect underscores the need for a more comprehensive investigation into the framing, narratives and discourses surrounding China's ambitious infrastructure and economic development project within the Kazakhstani media.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gain an understanding of the role of the BRI in changing China's image in the media of Kazakhstan, this study was conducted in two distinct parts: a content analysis of Kazakhstan's significant newspapers considering depictions of the BRI and China, and unstructured interviews

with a census of editors of these same newspapers to assess their perceptions of China and the BRI and the relationship between China and Kazakhstan, as well as their explanation for the newspaper's coverage of news about China.

This research undertook a comprehensive review of editorial content related to the Belt and Road Initiative in three prominent newspapers: Turkistan, Liter, and Egemen Qazaqstan. The aim was to categorize the content into positive, negative, and neutral tones, illuminating popular media perceptions. Utilizing key terms such as "BRI" and variations, the search encompassed both headlines and full texts.

A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to discern emerging trends from the editorial content. The primary aim was to understand media coverage of the BRI and China-related issues; comparative analysis and descriptive statistics were utilized to determine the significance of findings. Comparative analysis involved comparing the frequency and tone of coverage across different press outlets, while descriptive statistics were used to summarize key features of the data, such as the mean frequency of BRI-related articles and the variability in tone across different press sources. Despite some Sinophobic views expressed in interviews, the study identified three main trends: a notable prevalence of positive articles on China-Kazakhstan relations; an increasing focus on political stories alongside economic aspects; and a continued strong influence of Russian culture, particularly in cultural affairs coverage.

Analysis Categories: Positive, Neutral, or Negative

Tones of news were analyzed to capture the affective component, determining whether articles conveyed a positive/good, negative/bad, or neutral perspective (Newhagen, 1994). The 'tone' is regularly characterized as how journalists and their information feel about an issue. The study paid careful attention to the content of the articles to determine the tone, considering the flavor, sound, feeling, and attitude conveyed through the words. The categorization of stories was as follows:

- Positive stories were defined as those reflecting social cohesion, economic stability, and strength, progress, or improvement,

which tended to contribute to a favorable image of China;
- Negative stories highlighted conflicts, instability, and weakness, shaping an unfavorable image.
- Neutral stories presented information without explicit evaluative references or reflected positive and negative aspects.

According to Hardy, Harley, and Philipps (2004), content analysis "involves the development of analytical categories that are used to construct a coding frame that is then applied to textual data." This paper covers the results of a broader content analysis that has been done with a focus on textual analysis. Qualitative content analysis has a crucial interpretive dimension; this paper has used it as a methodological approach. The questions asked while analyzing the texts were:

General Question: What is the image of the People's Republic of China in Kazakhstan's significant newspapers within the Belt and Road Initiative context?

Q1: What are the dynamics of the image of China about the coverage of BRI by Kazakhstani media from 2008 to 2018?

Q2: How was the news coverage of "China's Image" in Kazakhstani media before the announcement of BRI, and how did it change after the announcement of BRI?

Q3: What are the primary themes or frames evident in Kazakhstani media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative and Kazakhstan-China relations, and which factors or entities significantly influence these narratives?

The two questions to answer vis-à-vis each context were: First, "Does the text primarily concern political, economic, or cultural issues?" Second, "Does the text present China primarily in a positive, neutral, or negative light?" The classifications for the first question were relatively easy to design. Stories were designated "political" if they covered bilateral meetings between political leaders, foreign policy, military affairs, or migration. Stories relating to trans-border crime were also designated as "political" since such crimes not only require political cooperation between security services but also feed into broader politically charged narratives of migration. Stories were designated "economic" if they pertained to aid, investment, debt relief, exports and imports, and

infrastructural projects funded by China. Cultural stories covered joint exhibitions, film festivals, sporting matches, and events pertaining to shared historical experiences related to the during and pre-BRI era.

The second question posed more problems for developing distinctive categories since it contains an intensely subjective and interpretive component. The terms "positive" and "negative" refer to whether an article gives the reader a positive or negative impression of Kazakhstan's relations with China and are consequently inseparably based on in-depth prior knowledge of areas of conflict and cooperation between the two nations. Therefore, unlike most other content analyses, which rely on software to code texts, the authors read every text analyzed, as a computer-generated keyword search would not be able to interpret positivity, neutrality, or negativity within a given text.

The primary focus of our content analysis was on two daily newspapers (Liter and Egemen Qazaqstan) and one weekly newspaper (Turkistan), encompassing a total of 477 cases. This sample included 71 cases from Turkistan, 204 from Liter, and 202 from the Egemen Qazaqstan newspaper, as detailed in Table 1. Our observation units were the Front Page, Economic page, World, Politics, and Culture sections. Within these sections, news articles served as the primary units for analysis.

Table 1: Total coverage of articles and Frames

Frames	Turkistan		Egemen Qazaqstan		Liter	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Economic ties	10	20%	23	12%	30	15%
Diplomatic ties	8	14%	60	27%	32	16%
The BRI	5	14%	28	17%	29	14%
Others	16	23%	23	8%	18	9%
Trade	10	7%	12	7%	23	12%
People to people	12	11%	23	10%	15	7%
Tourism	4	4%	6	2%	9	4%
Investments	5	4%	12	8%	31	15%
Infrastructure	4	3%	15	7%	17	8%
Total	71	100	202	100%	204	100%

Source: author's work.

In order to make these categorizations, a rubric was developed heuristically, relating the article's content to ongoing themes and issues in Kazakhstan's national relations with China. The criterion for membership in the "positive" category was that the bulk of an article should be devoted to a description of a shared historical experience in which the two states jointly achieved a goal is the BRI.

Interviews were conducted with editors of the three chosen newspapers to examine their perspectives on China's coverage of their newspapers and understand how relations between the two countries affected the news about China. The interviews also sought to understand the editor's perception of China and their explanations for their coverage or lack of coverage of news about China in their newspapers. As influential figures, journalists and editors are in a unique opportunity as individuals who not only live in and are citizens of the country but who also have the potential to influence and reflect cultural and social norms and political views for the people of that country. In addition to holding roles of varying significance in the formation of new content, editors are an essential element of gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009).

All three newspapers participated in the interview, resulting in a sample of three editors. Darkhan Kydyraly is Chairman of the board of the newspaper Egemen Qazaqstan. Beibyt Toktarbay is the deputy editor-in-chief of Turkistan newspaper. Nurai Orazov is the director-chief editor of the Liter newspaper.

Analysis and Findings

The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by China in 2013, is a monumental development project to

enhance economic cooperation and connectivity between China and nations spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. It has emerged as a key policy priority for the Chinese government, garnering substantial attention and investment from China and its partner countries. An illustrative example of this commitment is the agreement signed in 2013 between Umirzak Shukeyev, Chairman of the Board of "Samruk-Kazyna," and Chang Zhenming, Chairman of the Board of Directors of SITIS Group. This agreement outlined an extensive investment plan comprising 21 projects with an estimated cost of approximately 18 billion dollars.

The analysis of media coverage indicates that the Belt and Road Initiative, as reported in Kazakhstani media, showcases diverse viewpoints. From 2008 to 2018, Egemen Qazaqstan newspaper produced a total of 202 articles focusing on China and the BRI. Before the BRI's launch, the newspaper published 90 articles about China. This number experienced a notable increase, reaching 112 articles after the BRI's initiation in 2014. Globally, the reception of BRIs has varied considerably. Some have viewed it as a promising driver for worldwide economic growth.

Figure 1: Media Coverage Frequency Pertaining to China

Note: The radar chart represents the frequencies of different topics about China in Turkistan, Egemen Qazaqstan, and Liter. Each axis of the chart corresponds to one of the topic categories, and the distance from the center on each axis indicates the frequency of that topic in the respective media.

In contrast, others have perceived it as a means of Chinese expansion and a strategy leading to debt dependency for participating countries. In addition, the coverage of Kazakhstani media on the BRI has been contingent upon various factors, such as the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the BRI for Kazakhstan's economic development and the extent of Chinese investment and involvement in Kazakhstan's infrastructure projects. The BRI emerges as a dominant frame in

Egemen Qazaqstan, with 28 stories explicitly focusing on it from 2014 to 2018 (see Figure 1). This underscores the significance of the initiative in shaping the narrative within Kazakhstani media.

The portrayal of China in media coverage is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, encompassing economic and political power, human rights considerations, and international relations. The newspaper Egemen Qazaqstan

note that China's interest in establishing economic ties with Kazakhstan is driven by the latter's abundant resources, including oil, gas, and convenient European access. Media depictions of China vary, with some lauding its economic growth and global leadership while others criticize human rights violations and its authoritarian political system. The extensive media coverage of the BRI in Kazakhstani media, both before and during the BRI, has the potential to influence the image of China in Kazakhstan and vice versa, especially given the notable surge in BRI-related headlines from 2014 to 2018. For instance, some of the news carried on the front page of the newspaper Egemen Qazaqstan included the headline "A close neighbor is more than a distant relative." This article was about President Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan during which he lectured Nazarbayev University students on China's foreign policy priorities in

Central Asia and bilateral cooperation with Kazakhstan. In this meeting, both heads of state noted that economic cooperation between the two countries has significantly advanced, and the trade turnover is 26 billion US dollars.

Contrary to findings in some studies highlighting negative media coverage impacting public perception, the media coverage of China in Kazakhstan has been predominantly positive and mutually supportive, presenting both nations as loyal friends. The overall tone in Egemen Qazaqstan from 2008-2018 (Table 2) leaned heavily towards positivity (64.4%), followed by neutral coverage (33.1%), with negative tones being relatively rare (2.5%). Negative coverage, when present, often focused on concerns such as "Chinese assistance hindering the development of the country's borrower" by financing non-productive investment projects.

Table 2: Dominant tones in Egemen Qazaqstan, Turkistan, and Liter from 2008-2018

Tones	Egemen Qazaqstan	Turkistan	Liter
Positive	64.4% (n=130)	55% (n=39)	36% (n=76)
Neutral	33.1% (n=67)	26.7% (n=19)	47% (n=95)
Negative	2.5% (n=5)	18.3% (n=13)	17% (n=33)
Total	202	71	204

Source: author's work.

The Belt and Road Initiative has been a focal point for the Chinese government, attracting substantial attention and investment globally. Media coverage of the BRI worldwide has been diverse, with some heralding it as a transformative force for global economic development. In contrast, others have criticized it as a tool for Chinese expansionism and debt-trap diplomacy. According to editors Nurai Orazov and Darkhan Kydyraly, the BRI has played a crucial role in reshaping the perception of Chinese goods, dispelling the notion of cheapness, and contributing to an improved image of China. The analysis of the BRI coverage in Kazakhstani media, incorporating content analysis and in-depth interviews, underscores the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the coverage, shaped by considerations of economic benefits, drawbacks, and the extent of Chinese involvement in Kazakhstan's infrastructure projects.

The image of China in Kazakhstan, as depicted in the analyzed media coverage, is influenced by

diverse factors, ranging from economic and political power to human rights considerations and international relations. For instance, reports from Egemen Qazaqstan highlighted the significant global impact of the recent devaluation of the Chinese Yuan, signaling China's substantial role in the world economy. Media portrayals of China, both before and during the Belt and Road Initiative, exhibited a spectrum of perspectives, with some lauding its economic growth and global leadership. This study contends that the media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan has played a pivotal role in shaping the image of China within the country. The narrative portrayed through this coverage emphasized a storyline of loyal friendship between China and Kazakhstan. Turkistan, a newspaper from 2008-2013, reported 53% positive, 25% neutral, and 22% negative tones.

Mostly, Egemen Qazaqstan and Liter praised and published on their front pages meetings between leaders of the two countries and various

cooperation initiatives, including Chinese support for the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, a Kazakhstan-backed confidence-building foreign policy initiative; partnership during the EXPO-2017, and energy cooperation initiatives. They emphasized aspects such as 'Chinese finance' and 'Chinese assistance,' indicating China's allocation of funds to support non-productive investment projects with low economic returns in the recipient country. Additionally, they underscored Kazakhstan's opportunity to export meat to China, thereby enhancing the domestic market with beef and lamb. The newspapers also emphasized joint investment projects and the establishment of close cooperation with neighboring countries, portraying Kazakhstan's optimal policy approach on trade, security, and other pertinent issues in its relations with China in a positive or neutral tone.

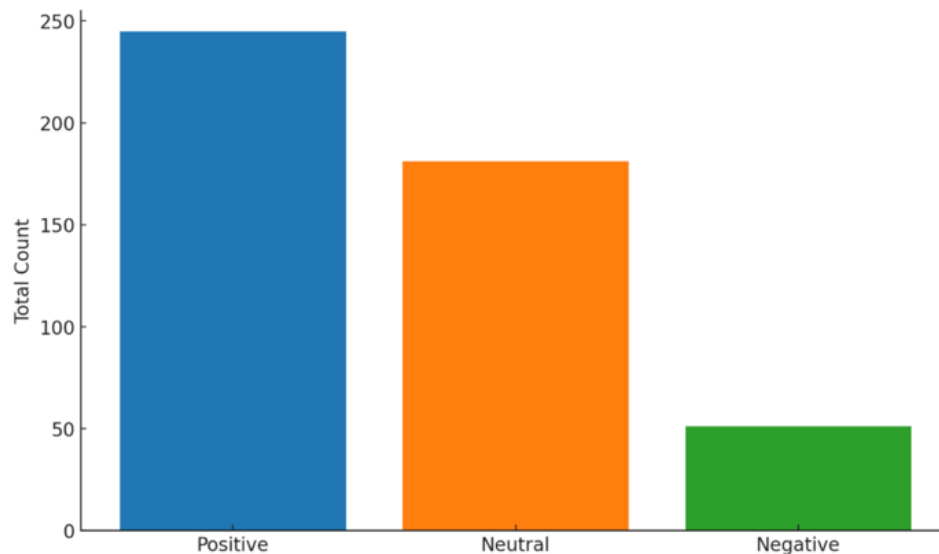**Figure 2:** Total Sentiment Distribution Across All Media

Figure 2 presents a bar chart illustrating the total distribution of sentiments across all media, segmented into Positive, Neutral, and Negative categories. Each sentiment is represented by a colored bar, with the height of each bar corresponding to the total number of publications. To a considerable extent, the newspapers have painted a positive picture of the Belt and Road initiative by highlighting the expected benefits that could be realized after successful implementation of projects. Though politics have taken center stage and greatly influenced the reporting, there is a general commitment towards informing the masses about the associated benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative. The reporting by the three media outlets has been candid and optimistic.

In conclusion, Kazakhstanis' impressions of media portrayals of China as a "loyal friend" have emerged from a complex interplay of favorable sentiments toward China as a business partner and ally, juxtaposed with concerns about potential future Chinese influence in Kazakhstan. This conclusion finds support in various academic sources, including the reviewed literature, underlining the multifaceted nature of these perceptions, shaped by historical, cultural, economic, and political factors. Positive economic partnerships and cultural ties contribute to the perception of China as a loyal friend, as emphasized in studies by Zhao (2019) and Huang and Chen (2018). However, concerns about potential Chinese influence, cultural assimilation, and political differences also impact Kazakhstanis' perceptions, as discussed in research by Kassenova (2017) and Huang and Chen (2018). This diversity of perspectives underscores the necessity for further research to comprehensively understand Kazakhstanis' viewpoints on media portrayals of China as devoted allies, encompassing insights from government officials, media professionals, and the general population, as explored through content analysis and in-depth interviews.

The dynamics of the image of China concerning the coverage of the BRI

The image of the BRI has been divided from different perspectives and political opinions. This study presents findings that diverge from the prevailing narrative in the existing scholarship on China's image in Kazakhstan, particularly in the periods before and during the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The combination of internal and external factors creates gravity for China to export its overproduction capacity and for developing countries to absorb it. At the same time, the increased infrastructure is expected to better serve the international trade needs of Chinese exporters, especially regarding reducing transportation costs (Zhai, 2018). Meanwhile, China's domestic demand for international goods, especially energy and agricultural goods, is exceptionally high, and developed transportation infrastructure will help China diversify its supply chain on both fronts (Zou et al., 2020).

As the BRI connects global energy suppliers and agricultural markets, the newly developed shipping routes offer a cheaper and faster pipeline for connecting China to Europe via South and Central Asia. In that regard, the BRI project is designed to better facilitate the connection of technology and clean energy.

Regarding the BRI, it is revealed that Kazakhstan actively explored the potential to position itself as a crucial international transport and transit hub between China and Western Europe. Historical parallels, drawing on the Great Silk Road, were invoked, emphasizing the strategic significance of this initiative for Kazakhstan. The study demonstrates an increase in predominantly positive BRI-related stories prominently featured on the front pages of newspapers in the post-implementation period. Notably, both Egemen Qazaqstan and Liter witnessed a 25-30% surge in news coverage on China and the BRI after its launch (see Table 2).

The Belt and Road Initiative is portrayed as an infrastructure investment that fosters connectivity between Kazakhstan and other participating countries. The newspapers maintained a predominantly positive and neutral tone in their coverage of China, both before and after the launch of the BRI. Interestingly, the study highlights the persistence of stereotypical perceptions about China dating back to the Soviet era, influenced by Kazakhstan's alignment with Soviet influences. As noted by Melet (1998), China's relations with Kazakhstan are situated within the continuum of Sino-Soviet relations. This historical perspective contributes to a nuanced understanding of how China is perceived, reflecting a blend of controversy rooted in history and an appreciation for its ancient culture.

Furthermore, the findings underscore that China is perceived as a global power, a leader in geopolitics, and a driver of economic development. Additionally, Chinese cultural elements, including cuisine, medicine, and overall cultural perspectives, emerge as influential factors shaping the perceptions of foreigners. The study thus offers insights that challenge conventional narratives and enrich our understanding of the complex dynamics shaping China's image in Kazakhstan.

The news coverage of "China's Image" in Kazakhstani media

In addition to the previously discussed findings, the study reveals that China's image improvement in Kazakhstan is attributed to its efforts to ensure the competitive quality of its exported goods. Media outlets in Kazakhstan recognize the importance of objectivity and emphasize the credibility of information sources about China. Consequently, there is a preference for obtaining information directly from official sources such as the embassy of Kazakhstan in China, Xinhua News, and other foreign news agencies. This approach reflects a commitment to objectivity and neutrality in reporting on foreign countries, with the media acknowledging the importance of maintaining an impartial stance.

Interestingly, while the relationship between Kazakhstan and China is deemed necessary, some media outlets have refrained from relying on Chinese media as a source due to language barriers. Despite this, the relationship between the two countries does not significantly impact news coverage about China. Editors, particularly those affiliated with state media, prioritize protecting the image of their country and strive to maintain neutral tones in reporting to avoid straining diplomatic relations. The use of terminology is crucial in this context, as China is referred to as the "Middle Kingdom", with

editors (D. Kydyraly, B. Toktarbay, N. Orazov) asserting that they use terms approved by Kazakh terminology.

Moreover, editors have adopted creative approaches to present China's activities in Kazakhstan, utilizing visual elements such as images of China's President Xi Jinping, the Chinese flag, or the Great Wall. Symbolic representations, such as roads to indicate construction projects and oil pipes to reflect the energy sector, serve as practical communication tools for conveying information about China. However, the study notes a relative need for more media coverage of cultural exchanges between China and Kazakhstan, with political and economic agreements taking precedence in news reporting (Table 3). This indicates a potential area for further exploration and understanding of the dynamics of media coverage of Sino-Kazakh cultural interactions.

The study has established that the dominant frames in the coverage of the BRI and Kazakhstan-China relations have included economic ties, diplomatic ties, the BRI, others, people-to-people, tourism, investments, and infrastructure. These relationships were mainly framed under economic ties. These ties indicated that despite the success of the reforms, China is still a developing country, and its finance and assistance appear and have become increasingly important in the international financial market.

Table 3: Story sections in Egemen Qazaqstan, Turkistan, and Liter from 2008-2018

Story sections	Egemen Qazaqstan	Turkistan	Liter
World	21,2% (n=43)	30% (n=21)	14% (n=28)
Politics	18,3% (n=37)	25% (n=18)	30% (n=61)
Economic	24,8% (n=50)	24% (n=17)	34% (n=69)
Front page	9,4% (n=19)	8% (n=6)	11% (n=23)
Culture	13,4% (n=27)	8% (n=6)	9% (n=18)
Other	12,9% (n=26)	4% (n=3)	2% (n=4)
Total	202	71	204

Influence of Kazakhstan–China Relationship on Media Coverage

This study indicates that the relationship between Kazakhstan and China is pivotal in shaping news coverage about China in Kazakhstani media. On a negative note, the findings suggest that to maintain a positive image of China in Kazakhstan, the two nations need to enhance cultural exchange. Orazov, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Liter", pointed out that much of the existing knowledge about China in Kazakhstan is colored by myths perpetuated through exposure to Chinese movies, goods, and visiting students. Despite sporadic invitations extended by China to Kazakhstani media for exchange programs, editors of three newspapers noted the need for more consistent media exchange between the two countries.

In contrast, the study highlights the positive development of cultural exchange between China and Kazakhstan, mainly through student exchanges. This dynamic cultural interaction, which is commonly called citizen diplomacy, is viewed as an effective means of dispelling myths and fostering a more accurate understanding of China. However, the study notes a need for more information regarding cultural exchange programs in Kazakhstan. Despite China's efforts through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative and the Confucius Institute, Russia and the United States remain significant influences. These countries use their media as a soft power tool to influence Kazakhstan.

Overall, the study posits that the BRI has influenced how China is covered in the media, aligning stories with the state's vision and promoting neutral coverage. While the pre-implementation perception in Kazakhstan viewed Chinese goods as cheap and of lower quality, the BRI has altered this image, presenting China as a strong country with a robust economy that actively supports developing nations. The study underscores the multifaceted impact of diplomatic relations, cultural exchanges, and economic initiatives on the portrayal of China in Kazakhstani media.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the media's role in influencing public perceptions of China's Belt and Road Initiative and its image in foreign countries. The rising impact of new media platforms, such as social media, necessitates thorough exploration, as they play an increasingly influential role in shaping public perception. Their influence on how the BRI and China's image are perceived should not be underestimated and calls for a more comprehensive understanding.

The study found that most media publications have positive views about the BRI. Most articles look at the BRI from the angle of enhancing worldwide connectivity through major infrastructure projects, reflecting China's ambition to extend its economic and geopolitical influence. Central to the BRI is soft power, which involves influencing others through cultural values and policy projection. China leverages the BRI to demonstrate its infrastructure capabilities, positioning itself as a global economic leader. The BRI's establishment of new shipping routes is particularly significant, as they offers faster and more economical ways to connect China with Europe via South and Central Asia, meeting China's external and internal economic strategies.

The study highlights China's positive image in Kazakhstani media. Despite language barriers limiting reliance on Chinese media, Kazakhstan's media maintains a neutral tone in coverage to preserve diplomatic relations. Editors carefully select terminology, referring to China as "Zhong Guo" or the "Middle Kingdom", and use symbolic visual elements like images of President Xi Jinping and the Great Wall to represent China's activities in Kazakhstan. However, there needs to be more coverage of cultural exchanges, with political and economic agreements dominating the news. The predominant frames in the coverage of BRI and Kazakhstan-China relations include economic and diplomatic ties, highlighting China's role as a developing country with increasing importance in the international financial market.

The study compared the coverage of the BRI in three Kazakhstani media outlets and found that their reporting was influenced by various factors, including their political affiliations and their relationship with China.

The study advocates enhanced media and cultural exchanges between China and Kazakhstan to foster more objective reporting on the BRI and other Chinese investments. As highlighted by Bellamy & Weinberg (2008), arts-based exchanges have historically fostered global relationships positively. Such exchanges can facilitate a deeper understanding of China's policies and culture, fostering mutual understanding and bridging cultural and communication divides between the two nations. Moreover, the study also suggests that further research is needed to investigate the impact of other forms of media, such as television, radio, and social media platforms, on public perceptions of China through the BRI project in Kazakhstan. Social media platforms, in particular, have become increasingly influential in shaping public opinion, and their impact on public perception of the BRI and China's image should be noticed.

It is important to note that the study does not provide any direct political or economic opinions on the BRI. However, extensive research indicates that the BRI, China's strategy for global infrastructure development, has markedly affected various countries, including Kazakhstan. This study indicates the significance of fostering objective reporting and cultural exchanges to facilitate mutual understanding between China and Kazakhstan. Continuous monitoring and evaluation are imperative as China's global influence grows through initiatives like the BRI. Future research endeavors should extend beyond print media, encompassing television, radio, and social media, to provide a holistic view of media influence on public perception.

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