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Educated into Sinophilia? How Kazakh Graduates/ Students of Chinese Universities Perceive China

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Abstract

This article examines perceptions of China and contributes to the ongoing academic debate on Sinophobia in Central Asia. However, unlike existing studies, it specifically focuses on perceptions of those, who have first-hand China experience – Kazakh students/graduates of Chinese universities. Based on in-depth interviews with them, the article argues that those with first-hand China experience tend to reject the China threat theory, found to be widespread among the general population. Instead, China-educated Kazakh youth perceive China mostly as an economic opportunity for their own country. Yet, this does not necessarily make them Sinophiles in the sense that they still express certain concerns related to their country’s potential over-dependence on China. But more interestingly, they see China as the “civilizational other.” This perceived civilisational abyss even among the more-informed segments of the population appears to be one of the main causes of the alienation of China and the Chinese in Kazakhstan.

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Keywords

Sinophobia, China, perception, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, youth

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Introduction

It is commonly argued that since President Xi Jinping came to power in China in 2013, Beijing has updated its foreign policy to make it “more proactive, assertive and globally driven” (Yu, 2017: 356). Despite attempts by Beijing to frame its global rise exclusively as an opportunity for others for peaceful development and prosperity, recent empirical findings suggest that this has caused the spread of anti-Chinese sentiments in different parts of the world (Armony and Velásquez, 2015; Horesh and Kavalski, 2014; Wang and Elliot, 2014). One of the regions, where the China threat has become a central part of the public debate, is Central Asia. Although the political elites in the Central Asian states have always been the “heralds of Sino–Central Asian friendship” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012: 114), the general public’s suspicion towards Beijing has been increasing over the years. This mismatch between “the enthusiasm of political and business elites and the popular sentiments and fears of China has already created tensions” on the ground (Kassenova, 2017: 114–115). On the one hand, dissatisfaction with close ties to China creates domestic discontent for local authorities. For example, in Kazakhstan alone, the Oxus Society’s Central Asia Protest Tracker registered twenty-three unique protests connected to China between January and June 2021 (Aisarina et al., 2021: 3). On the other hand, local discontent also complicates the operation of Chinese companies on the ground, as well as posing a risk to the security of Chinese nationals in the region (e.g. *Radio Azattyq*, 2019). Given the growing importance of the issue of Sinophobia in Central Asia, this topic has come under close scholarly scrutiny (Burkhanov and Chen, 2016; Chen and Günther, 2020; Clarke, 2014; Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012; Owen, 2018; Shailoobek Kyzy, 2021; Syroezhkin, 2014; Toktomushev, 2021).

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on perceptions of China in Central Asia. The theoretical argument here speaks to the constructivist approach in that the meaning of China and the Chinese is co-constructed, including local actors (Oliveira and Myers, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020). As a result, the kind of meaning external actors attach to China and its activities is of equal importance for Beijing’s international identity and roles, as well as for the success or failure of its initiatives.

Unlike the majority of existing studies, this article specifically scrutinises the perceptions held by those who have first-hand China experience: Kazakh graduates and students of Chinese universities, who live(d) in China for a period of time, speak Chinese, and, compared to the general public, are likely to be more aware of life in China, its history and culture. The existing literature suggests that the general public in the region is exposed to myths and stereotypes associated with the China threat theory. Very often participants of such studies have a “low level of awareness of China, of migrants from China, and of Chinese history, language, and culture” (Sadovskaya, 2007: 160). In other words, anti-Chinese sentiments in the region are, to a certain extent, triggered simply by the lack of awareness on the part of perceivers. In this context, the motivation behind this study is to explore what, allegedly, one of the best-informed segments of the public thinks about China and its policy. How are their perceptions different from, or similar to, those of the uninformed general public, and to what extent are anti-Chinese sentiments shared or not

shared among this specific group? This will be the main contribution of this article to the existing debate on perceptions of China in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan is chosen as a case-study country for three reasons. Firstly, it is China's biggest economic and political partner in the region, where the issue of Sinophobia has become more visible in recent years. Secondly, it is one of the main exporters of students to China. In 2018, around 12,000 Kazakh students studied there, making Kazakhstan tenth on the list of countries that send international students to China (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Finally, and more subjectively, data collection in Kazakhstan was more feasible for the author given his institutional affiliation in the country and the COVID-19-related restrictions for data collection in other countries of the region.

Based on thirty in-depth interviews with Kazakh graduates/students of Chinese universities, this article confirms that those with first-hand China experience tend to reject common myths and stereotypes related to the China threat theory, and, instead, recognise China as an economic opportunity for their own country. Yet, this does not imply that they automatically become Sinophiles. Participants in this study still share the concern that close ties with China may make their own country economically dependent on it, but this concern appears to be mainly caused by the perceived mismanagement of Kazakhstan–China relations by the government of their own country, rather than by any harmful and threatening intentions on the part of China. However, more importantly, the participants in this study, despite their extensive China experience, largely perceive it as the Civilizational Other. This perceived civilisational abyss even among the more-informed segments of the Kazakhstani public appears to become one of the main sources of alienation of China and the Chinese in the country.

The following section will briefly contextualise China's involvement with the Central Asian region, and discuss its main interests and policies, as well as perceptions. The next section then outlines the conceptual and methodological framework that the article follows. The empirical findings of the article are presented in the following section, which is followed by a discussion of the findings. The last section then provides the concluding remarks.

China in Central Asia: Interests, Perceptions, and Soft Power

Although Central Asia has always been of secondary importance in China's grand foreign policy, Sino–Central Asian relations have been gradually intensifying over time (Kembayev, 2020). Yau (2020) summarises that China's engagement with the region has changed from reactionary during the 1990s to economically driven in the 2000s (see also Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2013). Under President Xi, China's approach to the region has transformed into ideologically oriented, at the same time becoming more proactive and confident. As a result, it is difficult to deny that China has become a key external player for the Central Asian states from an economic (Van Der Kley, 2020), geopolitical (Fallon, 2015: 141), normative (Ambrosio, 2008), and even military aspect (Pantucci, 2021; Yau and Van Der Kley, 2020).

Despite Beijing's claims of its peaceful rise, scholars still discuss the implications of such growth for the region. On the one hand, some argue that it may have geopolitical consequences and change the balance of power in the region between Russia and China. Although frenimosity between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia has worked well so far, a further growth of the latter's power may "lay ground for revival of tensions" between them in the future (Gabuev, 2016: 77). On the other hand, and more significantly for this article recent growth in China's influence in Central Asia appears to be causing a severe backlash on the part of the Central Asian public.

China's Peaceful Rise Meets Central Asian Public Perceptions

Despite China's effort to frame the Belt and Road Initiative and its cooperation with others "as a product of China's benevolence to offer other countries to jump aboard the Chinese development express train" (Zhao, 2020: 322), the perceptions held by Central Asians seem to contradict such a positive self-positioning. Instead, the China threat discourse is widespread across the region. This discourse includes threat perceptions such as China has territorial pretensions in Central Asia; it can demographically absorb the region; Beijing's economic expansion leads to dependence on it; and China is ecologically harmful to the region, among others (Syroezhkin, 2014: 19–50). In other words, everything Beijing does can be interpreted as threatening within the China threat discourse (Zhao, 2015: 85).

Obviously, different segments of Central Asian societies are differently exposed to these threat perceptions. For instance, many scholars have observed the "warm politics and cold public" problem (Kerr, 2010: 136), implying that there is a huge gap between attitudes of the more favourable elites, who may enjoy personal financial gains from relations with China (Owen, 2020), and the unfavourable public, whereas the expert community's opinion of China falls somewhere in between (Clarke, 2014: 155). A recent study of public opinion revealed that Kazakhstanis' attitudes towards China vary across regions, with the Western regions of Aktobe, Atyrau, Mangystau, and Kyzylorda being the least favourable towards Beijing (Talap and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2020: 85). What is striking here is that these are oil-rich regions, where the majority of big Chinese companies and migrant workers are based. The same study also points to the difference in perceptions of different age groups. Those aged eighteen to twenty-four years were found to be the most favourable towards Beijing, and those above fifty-five years were the least friendly (Talap and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2020: 89). In addition, Burkhanov and Chen (2016) found that Kazakh and Russian language newspapers in the country differ in terms of their portrayal of China, with the former taking a more negative stance.

When it comes to the sources of anti-Chinese sentiments, some authors argue that many elements of the China threat discourse are based on historical myths and stereotypes, and often have little to do with today's reality (Syroezhkin, 2014: 19–50). The centuries-old history of Sino–Central Asia interaction, as well as more recent anti-Chinese propaganda of the Soviet period, is behind some of those widespread

myths (Owen, 2017). Secondly, suspicion towards China is also triggered by the secrecy and the lack of transparency in Central Asian governments' dealings with Beijing (Syroezhkin, 2014: 16). Thirdly, rather than being a purely Central Asian phenomenon, the growing level of Sinophobia is a worldwide trend, as pointed out in the Introduction. In this sense, Central Asia is just a part of this bigger picture. More recent developments could have further worsened the way in which China is viewed in the region. For instance, the situation with re-education camps in Xinjiang for Turkic citizens of China, and the cases of ethnic Kazakh asylum-seekers from China, in particular, have caused some domestic resonance in Kazakhstan (Standish and Toleukhanova, 2019). Moreover, periodic publications of articles with territorial speculations about the China–Kazakhstan border on different Chinese online platforms, as well as the harsh and sarcastic rhetoric of China's wolf warrior diplomats on the ground, trigger strong anti-Chinese discontent (Denisov and Zuenko, 2020; Martin, 2021). Finally, despite the lack of solid empirical evidence so far, it could be hypothesised that the spread of COVID-19 has had a negative impact as well (Rich, 2020), strengthening the China threat image in the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, some authors urge that the extent of anti-Chinese sentiments in Central Asia should not be exaggerated. For instance, building on the results of Gallup's 2006–2018 Annual World Polls, McGlinchey (2019) argues that "the majority of Central Asians are not Sinophobic, they are Sino-agnostic," meaning that people in the region tend to be indifferent to China rather than hostile. Moreover, Peyrouse (2016: 22) also suggests that "Sinophilia and Sinophobia go hand-in-hand in Central Asia. Both can be present in the same person depending on the angle of view or question being addressed." Therefore, examining perceptions of China merely through the simple dichotomy of favourable–unfavourable may overlook important details. Instead, any analysis needs to be more nuanced (Li, 2021).

Fixing Sinophobia: China's Soft Power in Central Asia

Although Chinese authorities do not openly admit the image problem that the country is facing in Central Asia, they nevertheless seem to be aware of this issue. For example, President Xi has recently re-emphasised the urgency of promoting the image of a "credible, lovable and respectable China" to the world and "constantly expand[ing] the circle of friends" (Firstpost, 2021). In this context, Beijing has been paying close attention to soft power to improve its international image and refute the China threat theory.

In the Central Asian context, China's approach to soft power has been multidimensional, including the promotion of its culture and language, as well as the Chinese model of political and economic development as an alternative to the Western liberal model (Peyrouse, 2021). For instance, China has established several Confucius Institutes in Central Asia to facilitate Chinese language learning, as well as to promote Chinese culture among local populations (Nursha, 2018); it constantly engages with various local actors to disseminate knowledge about China (Exnereva, 2018), and it increasingly offers scholarships to Central Asian youth to familiarise them with life in

China (Sadovskaya, 2014). The last point is especially important here. The number of Kazakhstani students at Chinese universities has drastically increased, especially since the early 2010s. For instance, if there were only twenty Kazakhstani students studying in China in 2003, by 2006 this number had increased to 3000 students (Sadovskaya, 2014: 23). In 2018, this indicator had reached 11,784 students, making Kazakhstan the tenth biggest exporter of students to China. In 2019, the number of Kazakhstani students in China further increased to 14,224 (Talap and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2020: 75–76).

Some fragmented data about these students' perceptions of China suggest that they tend to be positive about China and “challenge their friends and family who [hold] anti-China sentiments” (Yau, 2021). Similarly, Dave (2018: 106) claims that those, who have visited China with cultural and educational exchange programmes convey “enthusiasm, excitement, and a sense of novelty” about their visits, and, to a certain extent, become promoters of China. For example, in January 2021, a group of Kazakhstani graduates of Chinese universities initiated the Friendship of Graduates of Universities of the PRC, an informal platform designed to bring together local graduates and students of Chinese universities to share their experiences, assist prospective students, promote Chinese culture and language locally, as well as organise discussion events to familiarise interested people with China (Anonymous 28, 2021). Despite these examples, perceptions of China held by those with first-hand China experience still require closer scrutiny given the lack of empirical evidence. This article aims to contribute to this gap and offer some empirically supported findings related to what China-educated Kazakhstani youth think about China and Kazakhstan–China relations.

Conceptual and Methodological Approach

This article broadly draws from so-called image studies in International Relations, which define an international image “as a totality of attributes that a person recognizes (or imagines) when he contemplates that nation” (Scott, 1965: 72). This implies that an international image of a state is never monolithic, but rather is a complex entity consisting of various internal components. It is analytically unfeasible to identify and examine every single component of the image, thus the main question for an analyst is to identify which components or dimensions of the image to focus on (Cottam, 1977: 43; Herrmann, 1985: 26). Image theorists also suggest that in this plethora of internal dimensions of the international image, the three most important dimensions are: (1) a perception of an object's relative power, (2) a perception of whether an object represents an opportunity or poses a threat to one's own country, and (3) a perception of cultural proximity between one's own country and a perceived country (Herrmann, 2013; Herrmann et al., 1997). Following this conceptualisation, this article focuses on these three dimensions of perceptions of China and scrutinises how Kazakhstani graduates/students of Chinese universities see its relative power, whether they see Beijing as threatening or offering an opportunity to their own country, and how they view Chinese culture and assess the cultural proximity between China and their own country. As this study deals

with perceptions of others, concepts such as power, threat, opportunity, and culture are not defined in any specific way. The article is instead interested in revealing how the perceivers in this study interpret those notions in relation to China and its policies.

In total, thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews with Kazakhstani graduates/students of Chinese universities were conducted. Some interviews were held in person during my field trip to Almaty in summer 2020, but the majority of them were conducted online in April 2021 due to COVID-19-related restrictions. Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling techniques. First, various graduates/students of Chinese universities were contacted through the author's acquaintances. This allowed me to recruit several participants. Second, these participants were asked to further promote the study and assist the author in recruiting more participants.

Interviewees represented different parts of Kazakhstan in terms of their birthplace, but many of them were based either in Nur-Sultan or Almaty, the two biggest cities of Kazakhstan, at the time of interview. With a few exceptions, respondents mostly included those who studied or study in China in the post-2010 period. They represented different Chinese cities and universities (Beijing, Shanghai, X'ian, Urumqi, Nanjing, Wuhan, Dalian, and a few more), different subject areas (politics, economics, law, medicine, engineering, linguistics, etc.), and different degrees (language courses, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees). Interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian, and, on average, lasted forty to fifty minutes. Interview scripts were then inductively coded with NVIVO to infer the dominant patterns related to respondents' perceptions of China's relative power, whether it represents a threat or an opportunity, and its cultural proximity to Kazakhstan.

In general, recruiting participants for this project appeared quite challenging compared to the author's previous experience in the country. Many graduates/students refused to participate in the project and comment on China-related topics for various reasons. One reason for this could be a lack of personal interest in the topic on the part of some graduates/students who were approached. Another explanation could be the sensitivity of the topic in Kazakh society, especially for those, who have some ties to China or China-related organisations or businesses. This might also have influenced the quality of data in a sense that some respondents might have hidden their real perceptions of China, especially if they tended to be more negative. To cope with this potential challenge, additional indirect follow-up questions were always asked to clarify certain points and encourage the participants to reveal more. Despite a limited number of interviews compared to initial expectations, thirty interviews are considered enough to reach the level of saturation (Hennink et al., 2017), thus, are still able to capture the main narrative patterns.

The last point to be emphasised is that the article does not aim for empirical generalisation or the establishment of correlations given its qualitative nature and a relatively limited number of participants. Despite some challenges during the recruiting process, the author still tried to diversify and balance participants in terms of their gender, birthplace in Kazakhstan, cities and universities in which they study or have studied in China, as well as their different levels of education and subjects studied. However, any extrapolation of the findings beyond the context of this specific group is hardly possible.

Neither Sinophobes nor Sinophiles?

Unsurprisingly, respondents of this study, on average, articulated very complex and ambiguous perceptions of China. Sometimes perceptions appeared at different ends of the positive–negative spectrum, which implies that this specific group of graduates/students of Chinese universities is, to an extent, heterogeneous when it comes to their perceptions of China. On the one hand, a few participants demonstrated closer disposition towards the China threat theory, viewing Beijing’s involvement with Kazakhstan mostly in negative colours. From this angle, China is referred to as “the great whale, which can swallow us” as a nation (Anonymous 24, 2021). On the other hand, there were the “China fans” (Anonymous 28, 2021), as one of them called herself, who perceive China purely positively, admire its economic achievements and culture, support deeper ties between China and their own country, as well as totally rejecting the China threat theory. Any negative portrayal of China for them is “a lie [...] intentionally sponsored and disseminated by the international media, mainly by the Western media” (Anonymous 28, 2021). But these extreme positive or negative perceptions of China constitute the minority group in the sample of this study. In fact, very often positive and negative attitudes towards China go hand-in-hand depending on a specific issue area or angle. This section does not go into idiosyncrasies of particular individuals, be they China fans or China critics, rather it outlines the most common and dominant patterns of how China-educated youth, as a group, refer to the issue.

Economically Admired, but not a Role Model

When it comes to China’s perceived power as an international actor, there is no doubt in the eyes of respondents that today’s China is one of the leading players in global politics. Although China is not yet viewed as an equal competitor to the US in terms of its global influence, it is already recognised as the second most influential actor “capable of dictating its own rules to others” (Anonymous 25, 2021). First of all, China’s power as an international actor is attributed to its economic might. It is unanimously regarded by respondents as “the fastest developing country” in the world (Anonymous 21, 2021), which has been able to alleviate “hundreds of millions of people from poverty” (Anonymous 19, 2021). Another interviewee described it as “a wonder country, which is ahead of us by decades” (Anonymous 16, 2021). These and other similar references in the data demonstrate that people with first-hand China experience, tend to admire, above all, the level of economic development in China.

The two most salient elements that can be identified as symbolising China’s economic might in the eyes of respondents are the transport infrastructure in China and the app WeChat or online commerce in general. First, gigantic infrastructural projects, including high-speed trains, massive bridges, or good-quality highways are frequently articulated as respondents’ immediate associations with economically advanced China. It is clear from the data that the scale and quality of infrastructure in China impress respondents: “Even small Chinese towns have better roads than central streets in Almaty,” claimed one

respondent referring to the biggest and economically most developed city in Kazakhstan (Anonymous 16, 2021). As another interviewee stated: “the metro system in Beijing, I cannot even describe how good it is: well-connected, fast, and high-tech” (Anonymous 3, 2020). Very often, it is not just the quality of infrastructure that seems to impress the respondents, but also how fast these kinds of objects are built: “in front of my eyes, they built a huge transport junction in a week” (Anonymous 28, 2021).

With regard to the second frequently mentioned symbol of China’s economic advancement in the eyes of interviewed students, the app WeChat, respondents continuously expressed admiration for how WeChat simplifies everyday routine in China: “when we go outside, we just take our phones, and no wallet and other things are needed. It is so convenient and attractive” (Anonymous 2, 2020). WeChat and other similar technologies are said to demonstrate that China “is no longer a world factory that supplies cheap and low-quality goods” (Anonymous 5, 2020), but “is already a technological country with its own new inventions” (Anonymous 24, 2021).

Furthermore, respondents often compare the economic achievements of China to the situation in Kazakhstan. They often express the wish to see all the benefits of being an economically developed country like China in their own country. But what is striking is that despite this admiration towards China’s economic achievements, the dominant opinion among interviewees is that the Chinese model of development is not suitable for Kazakhstan. At the basic level, the argument articulated is that “there is no universal model of development. Each country has its differences. Therefore, we should follow our own way” (Anonymous 23, 2021). This is consistent with the official rhetoric in Kazakhstan, which has long been insisting that the country follows its own unique path to democracy and development, and “the whole world recognizes and calls it the Kazakhstan model” (Tokayev, 2019).

When it comes to particular reasons why China cannot serve as a model for Kazakhstan, two different arguments are provided by participants. One explanation is that it is simply impossible to replicate the Chinese model in Kazakhstan given that the latter lacks some of the prerequisites that were fundamental for China’s economic growth: “huge landmass, small population, underdeveloped logistics between the cities, no access to the sea, therefore Kazakhstan cannot follow the Chinese model of development” (Anonymous 21, 2021). The second interpretation implies that the replication of the Chinese model of development is undesirable for Kazakhstan because it is recognised as a distinctive civilisation; therefore, many believe that China’s political system, values, culture, and its way of life are “too specific, and will hardly be accepted by others” (Anonymous 18, 2021). What we see here is the civilisational othering of China based on perceived differences. This aspect is discussed below in more detail.

Restrained Suspicion Towards a Big, Self-Interested, and Artful Neighbour

The second aspect of analysed perceptions relates to opportunity and threat perceptions of China. As mentioned above, a few participants in this study, similar to the dominant public perceptions in Kazakhstan, demonstrated a closer disposition towards the China

threat theory. The general line of their argumentation is that “China historically tries to assimilate neighboring nations, and exploit them for its own purposes” (Anonymous 24, 2021). However, as mentioned above, the majority of China-educated respondents who were interviewed do not share such a definitive threat perception. For many of them, China is rather a country that may pose certain challenges (*vyzov* in Russian), but not necessarily a threatening one (*ugroza* in Russian). Many respondents used *vyzov* while referring to China. From this viewpoint, widespread sinophobic attitudes in society are “often exaggerated and caused simply by nationalistic moods” (Anonymous 27, 2021) or “expressed by people with no knowledge [of China]” (Anonymous 1, 2020). The main argument put forward by China-educated interviewees is that a stronger and more developed China is more beneficial for Kazakhstan. I was repeatedly reminded of the saying in Kazakh that “a wealthy neighbor is better than a poor neighbor” (Anonymous 2, 2020). In other words, the majority of China-educated respondents tend to think of China as an opportunity rather than a threat: “China is definitely an opportunity when it comes to money [investments], technology, and economy. From this perspective, it should be our first partner, ally, and best friend,” as one interviewee summarised it (Anonymous 12, 2020). This quote is also illustrative of the fact that China is recognised as an opportunity in terms of economy-related matters only: “we can take from China, but only from the economic aspect,” another respondent claimed (Anonymous 20, 2021). Such an obsession with economic issues can, again, be explained by the perceived economic might of China, discussed in the previous section. It is argued that Kazakhstan should do its best to use Beijing’s massive economic power for its own benefit by establishing closer ties in terms of commerce, investments, manufacturing, and also in the import of technology.

At the same time, such a perception of China in terms of an opportunity does not necessarily make China-educated Kazakhstani youth Sinophiles in the sense that they do not accept China exclusively as a force for good. Their aspirations towards closer economic ties with Beijing are motivated by rational thinking and economic calculations, but not necessarily by a belief that China is an altruistic actor. Although interviewees largely deny many elements of the China threat theory, they still express a certain cautiousness about Kazakhstan–China relations. The crux of the concern is whether Kazakhstan is able to cooperate with China on an equal basis, or whether there is the challenge of becoming economically dependent on it. Such a suspicion is caused by factors perceived to be intrinsic to both China and the respondents’ own country.

On the one hand, China is recognised as a disproportionately big player compared to Kazakhstan; therefore, “it is always a challenge for such a small country neighboring with such an economic giant” (Anonymous 21, 2021). Also, there is an agreement that Beijing is a self-interested actor ready to defend its national interests by all means: “I do not have rose-colored glasses. I understand China has its own interests. They may not say that to our face, but secretly pursue them,” another participant articulated (Anonymous 11, 2020). Finally, Beijing is recognised as an artful and wise actor able to strategically plan everything for decades and outsmart its less experienced partners such as Kazakhstan: “Whatever China does, there is always some strategic planning

behind it. We cannot boast the same” (Anonymous 19, 2021). What is interesting here is that such perceptions of China do not appear to cause negative attitudes towards it. The dominant narrative is that every country is understandably concerned about its own interests; thus, China cannot be blamed for pursuing a self-interested and strategically planned policy towards Kazakhstan. Here we come to the second aspect of the coin: the extent to which the Kazakhstan government is able to cope with this big, self-interested and artful Eastern neighbour. The answer among interviewees is predominantly negative. Very often, it is Kazakhstan’s government, which is blamed for potential challenges that the relationship with Beijing may imply: “Why should we blame China if our officials do not care about our country?” (Anonymous 11, 2020), or “it is not China’s fault, but our failure being unable to cope with China” (Anonymous 25, 2021), as some interviewees put it. In this regard, two issues seen as intrinsic to the government of Kazakhstan are highlighted the most. The first issue is the perceived high level of corruption in Kazakhstan, which was ranked 102 (out of 180) in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index 2021. Respondents claim that this problem allows China and Chinese companies to easily bypass certain legal regulations in Kazakhstan. As a result, corrupt local bureaucrats were said to undermine the national interests of the country vis-à-vis China. A few respondents admitted that they had personally witnessed cases of corruption while working in Chinese companies in Kazakhstan. As one of them summarised, “Chinese, who have lived 20–30 years in Kazakhstan, know perfectly how things are done here. They can easily navigate and solve their problems [informally]. Who is responsible? Of course, ourselves” (Anonymous 3, 2020). The second issue that was found to bother respondents is the lack of transparency from the Kazakhstan government in its relations with Beijing. The point that the government does not provide the whole truth about the terms of bilateral agreements and contracts with Chinese companies was constantly repeated:

Every government agency provides different information and figures. Even for me, as a person working with Kazakhstani–Chinese projects, it is difficult to find information about what is happening, where, and when. I cannot imagine how difficult it is for ordinary citizens. (Anonymous 21, 2021)

From this angle, anti-Chinese sentiments in society are seen as a logical consequence of the lack of transparency. Consequently, openness and better communication of state policies towards China are suggested as one way of preventing anti-Chinese sentiments.

Cultural and Civilizational Abyss

Despite an admiration for China’s economic success, as well as support for closer economic ties with it, China-educated Kazakhstani youth were still found to be sceptical of the cultural proximity between their own nation and China. The notion of culture should be read in its general anthropological meaning here, which understands it as a complex concept that includes values, customs, morals, laws, beliefs, art, etc. of a

given society. Contrary to the initial assumption that participants of this study would be open to Chinese culture given their better awareness of it, their knowledge of Chinese, and their experience in China in general, the majority of them clearly pointed to the cultural or civilisational abyss between their own country and China. The latter is commonly referred to as “a different world” (Anonymous 10, 2020), “a separate planet” (Anonymous 21, 2021), or “a peculiar civilization pretending to be a state” (Anonymous 18, 2021). Another participant similarly claimed that “after having lived with the Chinese for a long time, I can assure you that we live in different poles. This relates not only to language, culture, values, but also to our mindset” (Anonymous 16, 2021). These and other similar narratives indicate that even the majority of China-educated Kazakhstani youth tend to associate themselves with the Western civilisation in a broader sense, while cultural China is largely *othered* and is thought of in terms of them: “we can find similarities between us and Europeans or Russians, but not Chinese” (Anonymous 18, 2021). Yet, it does not necessarily imply that the othering takes exclusively negative forms. What is meant here is that Chinese culture is not necessarily rejected or seen as inferior. Rather the issue is more about the proximity between Chinese culture and their own culture. In fact, many interviewees acknowledge the richness of Chinese culture and history, and some aspects of it are admired, but they are regarded as different: “[In China] you just feel that you are on a different planet. Neither better, nor worse, just different” (Anonymous 24, 2021).

The othering towards cultural China takes both positive and negative forms. From the negative aspect, three of the most salient elements can be inferred from the data. First of all, it is the perceived difference in terms of certain values. Very often, this relates to person-to-person relations and hospitality. The Chinese are often described as very individualistic people, who do not care much about others. Some respondents claimed that it is difficult to find a “true friend” in China because people do not trust each other much and compete all the time: “you must be a capable politician to be a friend with the Chinese” (Anonymous 3, 2020). By contrast, people in Kazakhstan are believed to be more open and hospitable. Secondly, the negative othering of cultural China takes place on religious grounds. China is frequently referred to as an atheist state, which is contrasted with the important role of religion for many ordinary people in Kazakhstan. Consequently, the Chinese are seen as lacking some religious-moral principles and values that would “better” guide the relationship between them: “We often limit [our actions] by saying ‘*Qudaidan qorqamyz*’ [lit. we fear God]. There is no such belief in China,” one interviewee stated (Anonymous 4, 2020). Finally, and surprisingly, the perceived difference in terms of personal hygiene is used as another point of negative othering of China. Most commonly, interviewees expressed negative attitudes towards the inappropriate behaviour of Chinese people at the table, including eating noisily, slurping, and burping. As one student shared, “it causes rejection at the beginning, but then you realize that it is normal for them” (Anonymous 24, 2021). Again, such a perception is compared to the situation in Kazakhstan, where people are believed to have different, as well as more appropriate, hygiene habits and behaviour.

At the same time, there is also positive othering of cultural China, meaning that respondents similarly emphasise positive aspects that they admire in the Chinese culture and people. In particular, perceptions of the Chinese as hardworking and

disciplined people were salient in the data. “I envy how disciplined [Chinese] people are” (Anonymous 28, 2021) or “you wake up at 5 a.m. and all the Chinese are already working” (Anonymous 7, 2020), stated some participants. In this regard, China’s admired economic success is recognised as driven not only by the size of its population, but by the people themselves and their hardworking and disciplined traits. As above, this is often compared to Kazakhstan’s population, which is seen as relatively lazy and undisciplined: “If people in Kazakhstan worked equally hard, we would also be developing that fast,” another student claimed (Anonymous 22, 2021).

In sum, many respondents doubt that this cultural abyss between Kazakhstan and China can be overcome in the near future, because it is not simply about a lack of awareness as believed, but about fundamental cultural differences that exist between the two countries. They also believe that this cultural distance is another element that causes threat perceptions on the part of Kazakhstan society.

Discussion

What we see from the findings above is that, unlike the ordinary people in Kazakhstan, widely reported as having predominantly anti-Chinese sentiments, a majority of the representatives of China-educated Kazakhstani youth tend to perceive Beijing in favourable terms. They largely deny many elements of the so-called China threat theory popular in Central Asian societies, such as China’s threat to territorial integrity of these countries or the threat coming from the uncontrolled flow of Chinese migrants into the region. Instead, participants of this study widely acknowledge China as an economically developed and technologically advanced country, providing an opportunity for the development of their own country. In general, it has also been found that respondents of this study are heavily preoccupied with economy-related issues when it comes to their perceptions of China. There are arguably at least two reasons for this. Firstly, drawing from the modernisation theory and Maslow’s psychological theory of hierarchical needs, Xie and Jin (2021) have recently argued that people in developing countries such as Kazakhstan, in general, tend to be preoccupied with economic concerns, whereas in developed countries idealistic or value-oriented issues are of more interest for ordinary people. Secondly, interest in economy-related issues and an admiration towards China’s economic development among participants of this study can arguably be explained by their personal experiences in China. Many international students reside in economically developed urban places in China. As noted in the “Conceptual and Methodological Approach” section, the majority of participants in this study similarly studied in big cities. Therefore, when they move from relatively small and underdeveloped cities, towns, and villages in Kazakhstan to huge urban agglomerations in China, the different scale of Chinese cities, the comparatively better quality of life, and high-tech solutions in many aspects of daily life impress many Kazakh students. In urban places, they see those massive infrastructure objects every day, enjoy fast-speed metro and trains, and use *WeChat* and other similar technology that simplify their routines. Also, many of them travel across the country visiting popular tourist destinations, which, again, have advanced infrastructure.

Consequently, perceptions held by participants in this study might become subject to bias, when interviewees have witnessed and experienced all the achievements of urban China, whereas less developed rural places have arguably been invisible to them.

At the same time, the economic aspect has been found to be a double-edged sword. Despite the economic admiration, as well as the rejection of the China threat theory, China-educated young people have some concerns that closer economic ties may potentially make Kazakhstan dependent on China (the same finding was reported by Peyrouse, 2016: 20–21; Clarke, 2014: 157–159). However, as argued here, this restrained suspicion towards deeper Kazakhstan–China relations is not directed at China and its behaviour *per se*, but rather is caused by distrust in the intentions and capability of the respondents' own government. The issue of confidence in their own government due to lack of transparency or corruption has been mentioned by a few scholars both in Kazakhstan and other countries in the region (e.g. Clarke, 2014: 164; Shailoobek Kyzy, 2021: 73; Talap and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2020: 119). Moreover, Toktomushev (2020) observed that the majority of registered anti-Chinese demonstrations in the region “pursued other goals, such as the improvement of employment benefits and social packages, the introduction of transparent extractive practices or the release of jailed activists, albeit all packaged in anti-Chinese wrapping” (p. 11). In that sense, the Chinese variable is partly a reflection of domestic problems in Central Asian societies, rather than an issue with China *per se*. Additional research is needed to provide more details on how anti-Chinese sentiments are used to express discontent towards local governments in Central Asian countries.

Another important point worth discussing here is that China-educated young people do not necessarily become Sinophiles in the sense that the majority of them still tend to perceive China as a civilisational other. This is very much in line with the existing literature, which has widely reported similar findings in relation to the wider Central Asian population. For instance, representative surveys in the region have discovered that China as a cultural destination attracts the least favourable attitudes from the local population (e.g. Laruelle and Royce, 2020; Talap and Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2020: 85). The same argument appears to be applicable in the case of China-educated Kazakhstani students too. Extensive time spent in China does not seem to make them overcome this perceived cultural barrier. On the grounds of this civilisational othering, respondents of this study do not recognise China as a potential model to be emulated, despite their admiration towards Beijing's economic achievements (see also Chen, 2015: 74–77; Chen and Günther, 2020: 237). This civilisation othering of China can arguably be explained by the fact that the issue of identity is very sensitive for many people in relatively younger Central Asian states. They are still in the process of identity formation, and the population may still feel insecure about their culture, language, and traditions, especially when they face such an influential actor with thousands of years of history and culture.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that perceptions of China among China-educated Kazakhstani youth are both complex and ambiguous. As some authors have already claimed, one person may hold both positive and negative attitudes

towards Beijing depending on various issue areas (Peyrouse, 2016: 22). This once again emphasises the importance of moving away from the simplistic positive–negative or Sinophobe–Sinophile dichotomy when it comes to perceptions of China in Central Asia and elsewhere (Li, 2021). Instead, any account needs to be as nuanced and detailed as possible. This will help to better understand the content and nature of those perceptions.

Conclusion

This article focused on the perceptions of China among Kazakhstani students/graduates of Chinese universities. The findings from the study suggest that those who have a first-hand China experience tend to articulate more neutral–positive perceptions towards it. This finding visibly differs from what the existing literature reports about perceptions held by the general public in Central Asian countries, who often have little knowledge of China and are exposed to various stereotypical views of the country. Compared to the general public, those who have first-hand China experience appear to reject many of those negative myths about China. This may tentatively indicate the positive impact of Beijing’s international education policy in creating a more neutral-favourable image of China abroad. From the practical aspect, if better acquaintance with China is likely to decrease the level of anti-Chinese attitudes, then a logical recommendation to address the issue of Sinophobia in the country would be to increase the local society’s awareness of China and China–Kazakhstan relations. In this regard, the minimum first step should be the increase of transparency related to China’s activities in the country, which still mostly remains full of secrecy. The lack of timely and sufficient information decreases the level of trust and increases suspicions, including among China-educated individuals, as the findings of this article also suggest. Therefore, transparency should become a golden rule for both Kazakh and Chinese authorities to mitigate the consequences of the bottom-up backlash in the longer run. On the Kazakh part, it would require a regular release of relevant and reliable information about Kazakhstan–China bilateral relations, joint projects in the country, and the terms of those projects. On the Chinese side, it would, first of all, require openness on the part of its diplomatic mission on the ground. Currently, the Chinese embassy in Kazakhstan looks more like an impregnable fortress than an embassy, with very limited to no access for local researchers, and Chinese diplomats appear to cooperate only with selected local experts and journalists. Therefore, better engagement with local experts, scholars and journalists, who can further transmit reliable information to society, could become the first step for China.

At the same time, it is not suggested that a better communications policy and transparency on their own can fully cure Sinophobia in Central Asia. There appear to be some fundamental factors that cannot be simply addressed by an improved communication policy. First and foremost, those factors include “objective” cultural differences between the two societies. The findings of the study also suggest that the time spent in China and better acquaintance with it does not necessarily make Kazakhstani young

people feel closer to the civilisational or cultural China. This may potentially point to the limits of China's well-known cultural diplomacy, a central tenet of China's soft power, especially in places with insecure national identity and culture like Kazakhstan. This is a fundamental issue, and it seems unlikely that this perceived cultural distance will be overcome any time soon. Consequently, it can be hypothesised that civilisational and cultural arguments will keep playing a key role in determining perceptions of China and the Chinese in Central Asia.

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