

Chinese Media in Central Asia: Soft Power Tools or Equal Cultural Spaces?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dual role of Chinese media in Central Asia as instruments of soft power and facilitators of equal cultural spaces. It analyzes how media outlets like CCTV, People's Daily, and the Douyin platform promote China's cultural and geopolitical interests while addressing challenges such as linguistic barriers and regional perceptions. Key findings reveal that China's soft power leverages multilingual content, digital engagement (e.g., Douyin channels amassing over 144 million subscribers), and cultural events to shape public opinion. However, effectiveness is moderated by historical perceptions and local cultural policies. The study further identifies prerequisites for equitable cultural spaces, including academic exchanges and heritage preservation initiatives. Recommendations emphasize enhancing media localization, co-producing content with Central Asian partners, and prioritizing grassroots cultural dialogues. These strategies aim to strengthen Sino–Central Asian cooperation under frameworks like the Belt and Road Initiative, fostering mutual trust, cultural exchange, and regional stability. The research contributes actionable insights for policymakers designing media-driven soft power programs.

KEYWORDS

Chinese media; Tools; Soft power; Equal cultural spaces; Central asia

1 Introduction

China strategically employs media as a primary instrument to advance its interests and foster influence in Central Asia. This manifests through a dual approach: utilizing media as a tool of soft power while simultaneously pursuing the establishment of an "equal cultural space." The latter concept aims to facilitate closer ties, mutual understanding, trust-building, and ultimately, a shared cultural environment between China and Central Asian nations. Understanding the impact and dynamics of Chinese media in this region is therefore critically relevant in the contemporary geopolitical landscape.

The core research problem addressed in this article stems from the inherent tension and interplay between these two objectives: deploying soft power instruments (e.g., multilingual broadcasting, digital platforms like Douyin, cultural events) and fostering genuinely equitable cultural exchange. China seeks to promote its interests through cultural and humanitarian cooperation, tailoring its strategies to regional specificities. However, significant challenges impede this process, most notably the persistent language barrier, which hinders deeper integration and cultural penetration. While existing scholarship (e.g., Vodjannikov, Zinievich, Seleznev, Makhmutov, Serik, Ren Yi) has explored the role of Chinese media in Central Asia, this study aims to provide a more granular analysis. It specifically investigates the effectiveness of soft power tools and the conditions necessary for creating an equal cultural space within the context of China's Central Asia policy. Crucially, the research offers novelty by developing forward-looking, actionable recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese media as a soft power conduit in the region. This investigation holds significant theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, it contributes to nuanced understandings of soft power application and cultural space formation in international relations. Practically, its findings and recommendations are designed to inform the development of state programs for managing and developing Chinese media outreach in Central Asia.

2 Methodology

The methodology of the research is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis: content analysis of publications from Chinese media (CCTV, "Renmin Ribao") and data from the Douyin platform, discourse analysis of "soft power" narratives, as well as expert interviews with media managers from China and Central Asia. This approach allowed for an assessment of both the scale of influence and the cultural mechanisms of content adaptation for the region.

3 Results

China's media strategy in Central Asia demonstrates a dual dynamic: deploying soft power instruments while co-creating equitable cultural spaces. This not only allows for staying updated on the latest news but also helps to cultivate a certain level of culture among people, uniting their interests, views, and social behaviors through specific influences and actions on the public. To achieve this, various tools of soft power are employed in Chinese media practices.

3.1 Multilingual Content Scaling

Active publication of materials in various languages, including Russian, Uzbek, Kazakh, and others, which allows for presenting informational content in an accessible manner to a wide audience and influencing different viewpoints.

Effective operation of Chinese television channels and internet resources, which diversifies content with popular news and television programs that are in demand from the population, generating immediate feedback from the public. For example, CGTN's Central Asia channel launched Kazakh and Uzbek programs in 2023, expanding coverage to 28 million viewers (15% regional population, CGTN 2025 Audience Report).

3.2 Digital Platform Dominance

Douyin (known internationally as TikTok) serves as a powerful engine for cultural diffusion in Central Asia, as demonstrated by high-impact cases: People's Daily's #China-CentralAsiaRail series amassed 120 million views and inspired 24,000 user-generated videos, among them was a video by science blogger @Qianshuo, which showcased infrastructure connectivity, highlighted the importance of the Central Asian Railway, and received 68,000 likes from users.

3.3 Conducting international events and exhibitions that promote the country's culture and advance key national ideas

For example, the Xi'an-Almaty cultural tourism train, which launched in June 2025, features traditional Chinese medicine demonstrations, traditional cultural lectures, and intangible cultural heritage experiences throughout the journey, promoting cultural exchange between China and Central Asian countries. The train's interior décor incorporates elements of both Chinese and Kazakh culture, such as the Xi'an Big Wild Goose Pagoda and Kazakh landmarks [10]. In June 2025, the Central Asia-China cultural exchange event "Good Neighborliness and Friendship, Hand in Hand for Progress" was held in Astana, Kazakhstan. The event included the launch ceremony of "Plain Words for the People - Xi Jinping's Favorite Stories" (International Edition). These tools enable a subtle managerial influence on the masses, shaping public opinion and ideology among them. However, this approach often faces limitations manifested in the persistence of long-standing negative attitudes in society, state cultural policies, accumulated cultural values, etc.

It should be noted that alongside the use of soft power tools in Central Asia, China also focuses its efforts on forming an equal cultural space. The main conditions for its creation are:

(1) development and support of international academic exchanges, which helps unite students' interests and form a common culture. According to statistics from China's Ministry of Education, there were 6,500 Uzbek students studying in China in 2019. The China Scholarship Council (CSC) held an education fair in Uzbekistan, with 30 universities (such as Tsinghua University and Wuhan University) participating in the recruitment drive. In 2018, Jilin University alone admitted 2,500 foreign students, including those from Central Asia.

(2) establishment of cultural centers, which also shapes a common culture and interests of its participants (festivals, concerts, celebrations, and sporting events can be organized within these centers);

(3) active efforts to develop and preserve cultural heritage, which involves state support as well as backing from local authorities and other economic entities. The city of Suiye, located near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, is an ancient city site with very deep roots in China. China-Kyrgyz archaeological projects restored Tang-era Buddhist temples in Suyab.

It should be noted that Central Asia shares a common border with China, which opens up opportunities not only for foreign trade cooperation but also for developing friendly and cultural relations between the countries. Therefore, the Chinese government actively employs soft power tools in the socio-cultural sphere and humanitarian field. In its policy, China seeks to emphasize the country's historical heritage, its culture, traditions, and independence from Western influence. In Central Asia, the Chinese government maintains a position of avoiding hard pressure on society and refraining from imposing alien values and norms. Soft influence implies a non-intrusive presentation of one's own ideas, opinions, and views in the spheres of culture, economy, politics, and other areas. China strives to completely avoid sharp discussions, political disputes, and disagreements that could lead to heightened tensions in society. Using media as a tool of soft power and forming an equal cultural space enables the process of integrating peoples, cultures, ideas, and values within society, as well as promoting one's own ideas, which allows us to judge its sufficiently effective use.

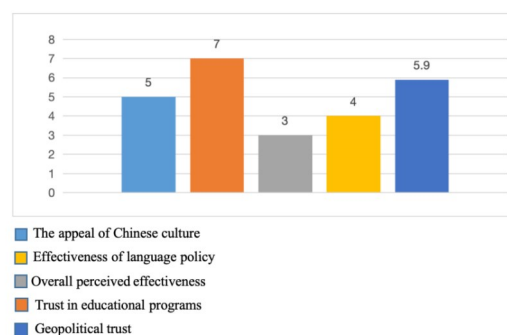


Figure 1 Perception of China's soft power in Central Asia

Source: Developed by the author

As shown in Figure 1, educational programs receive the highest level of trust in the perception of China's soft power in Central Asia. The second position is occupied by overall perceived effectiveness, while the attractiveness of Chinese culture ranks third. Overall, the perception of China's soft power in Central Asia remains at a relatively high level, indicating its positive impact on socio-cultural development.

China Global Television Network (CGTN), a Chinese global television network, has played a significant role in developing an equal cultural space in Central Asia by expanding cultural exchanges and establishing close cooperation with Central Asian countries through news content, as well as cultural, educational, and entertainment programs. This channel has successfully united various media space participants based on their interests, values, and needs.

The most popular Chinese video platform is called Douyin. Table 1 presents information about the presence of national and local media outlets on this platform.

Table 1 Assessment of National and Local Media Presence on the Douyin Video Platform

Media	Number of subscribers, mln.	Number of videos, mln.	Number of likes, mln.
CCTV news	131,2359	5859	5789,7722
"People's Daily"	144,36	3449	7999,0019
Peopl.cn	53,4371	5675	2579,7022
Sichuan Guancha	47,9873	15092	3038,0347
"China Youth Daily"	24,0636	4310	1342,5632

Thus, it can be seen that the platform's popularity is quite high based on both the total number of subscribers and likes. Through Chinese media, cultural exchange is facilitated among all participants in the territorial space by sharing knowledge, public opinion, interests, and more.

This article develops recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of Chinese media in Central Asia as a soft power tool, which are visually presented in Figure 2.

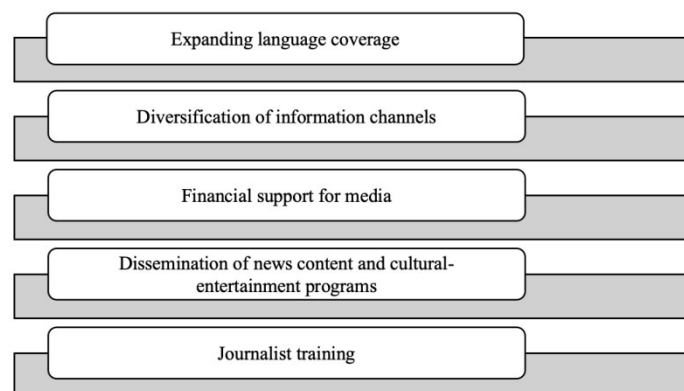


Figure 2 Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of Chinese media in Central Asia as a soft power tool

Source: Developed by the author

The cultural ties between China and Central Asia are rooted in the ancient Silk Road tradition. From the Tang Dynasty city of Suiye (present-day Ak Beshim in Kyrgyzstan) to the contemporary joint preservation of intangible cultural heritage, this cross-civilizational dialogue has always been at the core of regional interaction. Against this backdrop, Chinese media, through the construction of a "warm power" communication paradigm, are transforming historical heritage into a tool for modern cultural collaboration.

Essentially, this is about transcending the one-way output of traditional soft power through empathy, alleviating Central Asian concerns about the "China threat" theory through emotional connection.

Amid global transformations, Chinese media serve as a bridge for Central Asian countries to foster cultural dialogue and maintain historical traditions.

The journalism profession is particularly vital, grounded in principles of fairness, objective event assessment, transparency, and social responsibility to both society and the state. Their primary task is to communicate information, report on significant events, and shape public opinion.

In practice, the media as a primary soft power tool in Central Asia aims to establish friendly relations with China and create a unified, equitable cultural space.

4 Discussion

The primary objective of Chinese media in Central Asia is to facilitate cultural interaction, strengthen mutual understanding, and build trust between nations. Key forms of international cooperation include: establishing joint media projects and forums for event coverage; developing collaborative cultural exchange programs; sharing news content; and creating and implementing innovations.

The expected outcomes of such joint efforts should include: fostering open dialogue between China and Central Asian countries; enhancing international cooperation and cultural exchange; promoting cultural awareness; showcasing cultural achievements; and driving economic growth and development across the region.

5 Conclusion

It can be concluded that China, through its use of soft power tools, has focused on shaping the country's cultural identity while actively developing relations with Central Asia and preserving its national traditions and distinctive characteristics.

The international "Belt and Road" strategy has played a leading role in fostering cultural exchange, reinforcing the humanitarian focus of cultural policy in contemporary contexts. The application of soft power instruments in Central Asia has enabled China to enhance its national image, promote core ideas and values, and establish an equitable cultural space.

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