

## ASSESSMENT OF PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN THE KAZAKHSTANI SOCIETY: MYTHS AND REALITY

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### ABSTRACT

**T**he article examines the image of China in Kazakhstani society, analyzes the perception and attitude of Kazakhstan's population towards China. Based on the results of a survey of Kazakhstan's population ( $N = 2,594$ ) and an expert survey ( $N = 23$ ), the authors identify the principal stereotypes about China in the mass perception of Kazakhstanis. Also, the authors assess the level of awareness of the population about China and its projects and the perception by the Kazakhstani people of the economic, political and socio-cultural influ-

ence of Kazakhstan's eastern neighbor. In addition, the article examines the attitude of Kazakhstanis to bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and China and the manifestations of Sinophobia in Kazakhstani society and identifies the main factors of anti-Chinese sentiments in society.

The article also presents the authors' original model of the China Perception Index in Kazakhstan, which consists of four parameters that reveal the level of cultural, economic and political perception of the country's eastern neighbor.

*The results of the study establish that the general attitude of the Kazakhstani society towards China is neutral. The main factor that influences the perception of China is the degree of the Chinese investors' presence in the region. The study proves the correlation between the duration of the presence of Chinese investors and the scale of business, on the one hand, and the level of perception, on the other: the longer the history of presence*

*in the region, the less positive the attitude of the population towards China.*

*Along with this, the study demonstrates a positive relationship between educational achievements and the China Perception Index. Thus, Kazakhstani citizens with an academic degree (Index = 0.24) have a significantly more positive attitude towards China, compared to those with a secondary technical and vocational education (Index = 0.09).*

**KEYWORDS:** *Kazakhstan, China, perception of China, Sinophobia, China Perception Index.*

## *Introduction*

Foreign policy strategies that are set forth by the People's Republic of China and reflect the approach of China's political leadership to the international relations system and global governance are constantly at the epicenter of attention and arouse increasing interest. Belt and Road is a unique precedent in the modern international relations system. The implementation of Belt and Road can also ~~be considered a new stage in the Chinese economic Go Global strategy and a new step towards~~ China's integration into the global economy by increasing Chinese investments abroad.

Meanwhile, certain difficulties are emerging during the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, including increasing default risks in developing countries with unstable economies. The implementation of this strategy may also lead to an asymmetric dependence of the regional states on the PRC.<sup>1</sup>

In some countries, the Belt and Road projects face difficulties due to the negative attitude of the local population. This is especially true of neighboring countries, where the neighbor factor can be a negative one in the development of such initiatives. The governments' decision-making process should be naturally based on the interests of the state and the people. As a country bordering China, Kazakhstan needs to defend its own national interests and understand China's possible long-term strategies and scenarios. That is why it is vital to win the support of the population in the decisions on the implementation of such initiatives.

A review of China-related discourse in modern Kazakhstani society reveals the presence of a somewhat negative attitude towards the eastern neighbor associated with public debates on land sale, unfair business conduct in the country, significant state debt, etc. However, some of these statements are not substantiated or based on reliable facts. Even experts sometimes use unverified data in discussions, thereby creating certain myths about China. That is why this study aims to scientifically analyze the current perception of China in Kazakhstani society and answer the following research questions:

- (1) How is China perceived in Kazakhstani society?
- (2) What factors influence the perception of China in Kazakhstan?

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<sup>1</sup> See: Julie Yu-Wen Chen, S. Jimenez-Tovar, "China in Central Asia: Local Perceptions from Future Elites," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2017, pp. 429-445.

## Research Methodology

To answer these research questions, the authors use the results of the survey and expert interviews, as well as secondary statistical data.

In order to analyze the degree of China’s influence on Kazakhstani society, the authors developed the China Perception Index in Kazakhstan, which is a rating scale from “-1” to “1,” where -1 stands for a very negative, and 1—for a very positive attitude. Four components are measured:

- (1) general attitude towards China (general perception);
- (2) China as a center of influence (geopolitics and security);
- (3) China as an investor (cooperation);
- (4) Chinese culture and education (soft power).

The index was slated to resolve the following tasks:

- (1) to evaluate the image of China in the mass perception of Kazakhstanis;
- (2) to assess the level of the population’s awareness about China and its projects in Kazakhstan;
- (3) to assess the perception of China’s economic, political and socio-cultural influence in Kazakhstan by the Kazakhstani population;
- (4) to assess the mass perception of bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and China;
- (5) to study the features of manifestation of Sinophobia in Kazakhstani society;
- (6) to identify the main factors of Sinophobia.

Separate questions and the formula for calculating the Index were developed to measure each of the components (see Table 1).

*Table 1*

**Questions for the Components of the China Perception Index  
in Kazakhstan and Calculation Algorithms**

Questions Related to the Component	Algorithm
<b>Component 1 <i>General attitude towards China</i> (general perception)</b>	
Please rate your general personal attitude towards China	Component 1 = (positive + 0,5*positive rather than negative) — (0,5*negative rather than positive + negative)/positive + rather positive + rather negative + negative + not sure)
<b>Component 2 <i>China as a center of influence</i> (geopolitics and security)</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you think China’s influence in the world has been recently increasing or decreasing?</li> <li>2. Do you think China is a friendly or unfriendly state towards Kazakhstan?</li> <li>3. Do you think China has more weight in the world than Russia, or less?</li> <li>4. Do you think China is an economically developed country?</li> </ol>	<p>Indicator for each question of Component 2 = (is probably increasing — is probably decreasing)/(is probably increasing + is probably decreasing + not sure)</p> <p>Component 2 = arithmetic mean of 7 indicators</p>

Table 1 (continued)

Questions Related to the Component	Algorithm
5. Do you think China is a rich country? 6. Do you think China is a socially responsible state? 7. Does or does not China pose a threat to Kazakhstan?	
<b>Component 3 <i>China as an investor</i> (cooperation)</b>	
1. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (production) in the future? 2. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (education) in the future? 3. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (security) in the future? 4. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (trade) in the future? 5. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (technology) in the future? 6. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (logistics) in the future? 7. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (agriculture) in the future? 8. In your opinion, should Kazakhstan develop or weaken cooperation with China in such areas as ... (finance) in the future?	Indicator for each question of Component 3 = (develop-weaken)/(develop + weaken + not sure)  Component 3 = arithmetic mean of 8 indicators
<b>Component 4 <i>Chinese culture and education</i> (soft power)</b>	
1. Do you like Chinese cuisine? 2. Do you trust Chinese medicine? 3. Do you trust the quality of goods made in China? 4. Would you like to know more about the history and culture of China? 5. Would you like to visit China as a tourist? 6. Would you like your child to learn Chinese? 7. Would you like to get an education yourself or send your child to study in China? 8. Would you like to move to China?	Indicator for each question of Component 4 = (yes-no)/(yes + no + not sure)  Component 4 = arithmetic mean of 8 indicators

A sociological survey of the population was conducted from May to July 2020 to calculate the Index. The mass poll of the population was carried out in Kazakh and Russian languages through the

TALAP.Polls mobile application. The questionnaire included 41 questions aimed at assessing the perception of China’s political, economic, social and cultural presence and its influence on the Republic of Kazakhstan. 2,594 citizens of Kazakhstan over 18 years of age from all of the country’s regions participated in the survey. The socio-demographic data of the respondent sample fully reflects the general population of the country. Thus, 58.9% of the respondents are urban population, 41.1%—rural population; 53.4% of respondents are women, 46.6% are men; 19% of respondents are aged 18-24 years, 24.9%—25-34 years old, 19.5%—35-44 years old, 15.4%—45-54 years old, 11.7%—55-64 years old, 9.5%—65 years and older. The sample was biased only in relation to the level of education. 2.9% have completed 9 grades of school, 9.1% received a secondary education (10-11 grades), 35.7%—specialized secondary (vocational school, college), 42.2%—higher or incomplete higher education, 8.8% have an academic degree, 1.3% refused to provide data on education.

Along with this survey, 12-question expert interviews were carried out in July-August 2020. The interviews were conducted with 23 experts across 16 private, public and international sectors. All interviewed experts were aware of the PRC’s activities in implementing domestic and foreign policies, international projects and initiatives. The main purpose of the expert interview was to obtain the most objective expert assessment of the perception of China in Kazakhstan (see Table 2).

*Table 2*

**Expert Interview Questions**

No.	Question	Goal of the Question
1	On a scale from 0 to 7, what is the level of public interest in China in Kazakhstan today?	Obtain expert opinion on the level of public interest in China
2	You assessed the level of public interest in China among Kazakhstanis as above average, high or very high. What do you believe is the reason for this?	Identify the reasons for public interest in China among Kazakhstanis
3	In your opinion, what sources of information do Kazakhstanis most often use to obtain information and news about China?	Obtain expert opinion on the most relevant channels for informing the population about China
4	Indicate the areas in which cooperation between Kazakhstan and China, from your point of view, is beneficial for Kazakhstan?	Obtain expert opinion on the most profitable areas for relations with China
5	Indicate the sectors of the economy in which cooperation between Kazakhstan and China is effective for Kazakhstan from your point of view?	Obtain expert opinion on the most effective sectors of the economy for cooperation with China
6	How would you characterize the Kazakh-Chinese cooperation at the present stage?	Obtain expert opinion on the nature of relations between Kazakhstan and China
7	What benefits do you see for Kazakhstan from cooperation with China?	Obtain expert opinion on the benefits of cooperation between Kazakhstan and China
8	What risks do you see for Kazakhstan from cooperation with China?	Obtain expert opinion on the risks of cooperation between Kazakhstan and China
9	Is China a friendly state towards Kazakhstan?	Identify possible factors that affect the degree of China’s influence in Kazakhstan

Table 2 (continued)

No.	Question	Goal of the Question
10	In your opinion, what factor has the greatest influence on the formation of public perception of China in Kazakhstan?	Obtain expert opinion on the factors that affect the formation of a public image of China in Kazakhstan
11	In your opinion, what image of China dominates public perception today?	Obtain expert opinion on the image of China formed by the bulk of the population of Kazakhstan
12	How would you say the attitude of Kazakhstanis towards China has changed over the past three years: has it improved or worsened?	Obtain expert opinion on possible changes in the attitude of Kazakhstanis towards China over the past 3 years
13	On a scale from 0 to 7, what is the current level of Sinophobia in Kazakhstani society?	Assess the level of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan based on expert opinions
14	What do you see as the main reasons for the development of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan?	Find out the causes of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan
15	Please indicate the statement that you support the most. 1. The factor of Sinophobia is a real instrument for destabilizing the situation in Kazakhstan; 2. The destructive influence of Sinophobia is exaggerated, it is sporadic and has a localized.	Find out the causes of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan
16	Please indicate the statement that you support the most. 1. Sinophobia reduces the investment potential of Kazakhstan 2. Sinophobia does not affect China's investment interests in Kazakhstan	Find out the causes of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan
17	Please indicate the statement that you support the most. 1. Sinophobia in Kazakhstani society is formed spontaneously as a result of an incorrect information policy towards China 2. The formation of Sinophobia in Kazakhstani society is the result of certain purposeful actions	Find out the causes of Sinophobia in Kazakhstan

## Results of Research and Discussion

The growing role of China is one of the most noticeable trends in the modern development of post-Soviet Central Asia. Economic and political interests play an important role in the positive assessment of the Chinese factor in the Central Asian states. The latter believe that they cannot expect qualitative development or improvement of their socio-economic situation without attracting foreign investment, using foreign experience and technologies. At the same time, while Central Asian elites

regard the PRC primarily as an important economic and political partner, the Chinese factor is often considered a threat by the public.<sup>2</sup>

The study demonstrates that the average value of the China Perception Index in Kazakhstan is 0.13 (possible range: -1 to +1). According to the scale, this result shows neutral level of perception on average.

In terms of indicators, the following results are observed:

- General attitude towards China—0.27;
- China as a center of influence—0.22;
- China as an investor—0.26;
- Chinese culture and education— -0.22.

The value of the China Perception Index differs depending on the region or city of republican significance and ranges from -0.36 to 0.39 (see Fig. 1).

As the analysis demonstrates, the regions with the highest Index score differ from the regions with a low Index score by the higher level of public confidence in China as an investor and a center of influence. Thus, business and government representatives in the Kostanay region noted the comfort of working with Chinese investors during the online expert meeting. Positive feedback was provided on the importance of technology transfer by the Chinese, which contributes significantly to the development of the regional and Kazakhstan's technical "intelligentsia." Also, Kostanay experts noted the benefits of developing production in the region by Chinese investors due to the convenient location and proximity of the border sales market of four Russian regions.

"Chinese investors do not merely invest in our projects. Investors provide technological schemes, technological maps... The very idea of assembling a product (i.e., a tractor.—*Author's Note*) from vehicle kits and further localization aims primarily to educate technical intelligentsia in Kazakhstan, so that people improve their qualifications and gain experience. The first priority is for people (Chinese investors.—*Author's Note*) to share their technology. In terms of technology, the Chinese partners are quite open and always ready to help," said a representative of the Chinese tractor assembly plant in Kostanay.

In terms of communications with Chinese citizens, experts from Kostanay region noted the loyalty of both China-based partners and Chinese employees working in Kazakhstan.

Business representatives from Shymkent and Turkestan region also expressed different opinions and wishes regarding interaction with Chinese investors and partners. For instance, they proposed certain measures that create parity conditions in Kazakh-Chinese relations. It is also necessary to elaborate the issues related to supply of finished Kazakhstani agricultural goods to the Chinese market and consider the principle of level balance in bilateral trade.

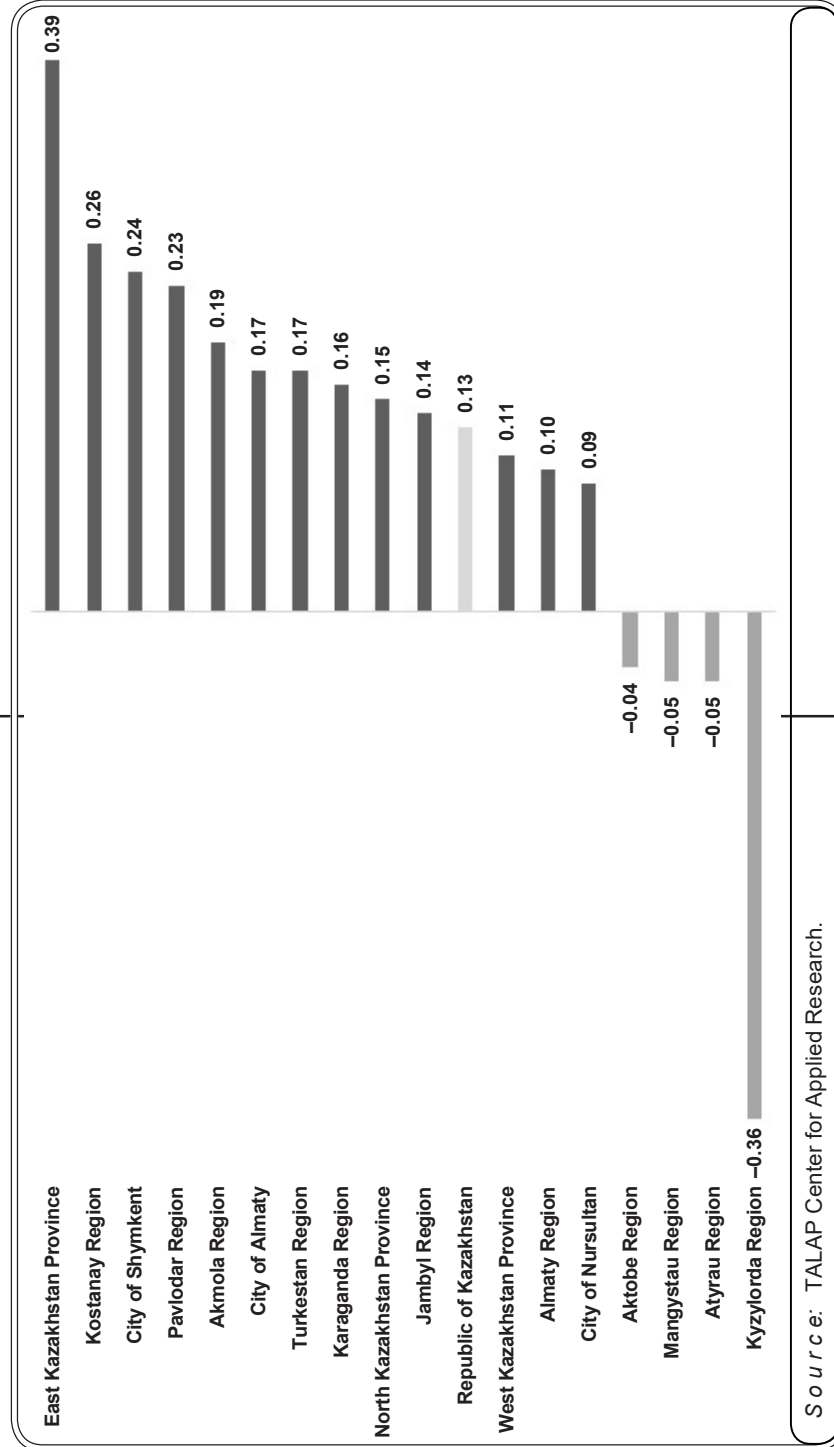
The China Perception Index averaged 0.15 in the urban areas of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In rural areas it equaled 0.1, which is lower than the national average (0.13). All Index values are higher among the urban population. The biggest difference is observed in Indicator 2 and Indicator 3 values (see Fig. 2).

The study demonstrated that Kazakhstani women (Index = 0.16) have a more positive attitude towards China than men (Index = 0.10). Thus, women have a more positive general attitude towards China (Indicator 1). The index value among the surveyed women is 0.06 points higher than among the surveyed men. The difference in Indicator 4 values (Chinese culture and education) is also significant. Both men (-0.27) and women (-0.17) are suspicious of Chinese culture and education. There is a difference of 0.10 points in this indicator value (see Fig. 3).

<sup>2</sup> See: D. Malysheva, "Postsovetskie gosudarstva Tsentralnoi Azii v politike Kitaia," *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, No. 5, 2019.

Figure 1

Values of China Perception Index in Kazakhstan by City and Region



Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.



Figure 2

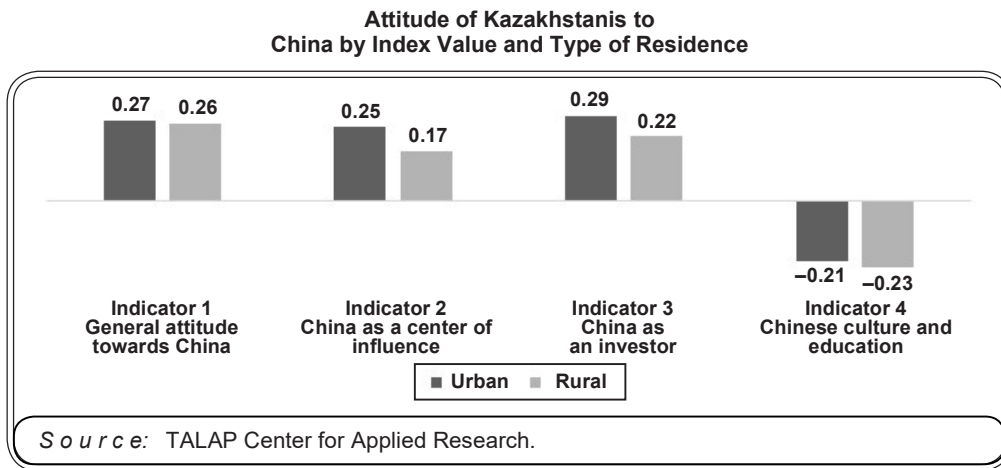
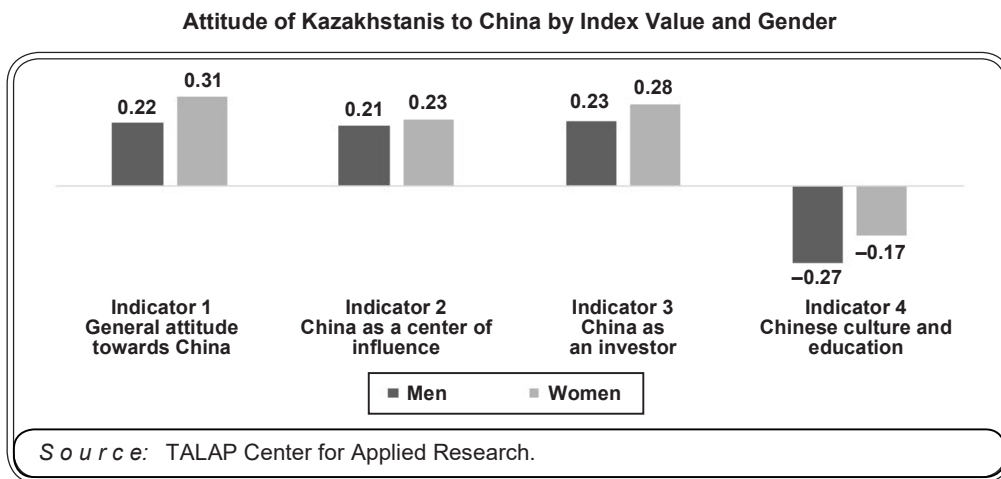


Figure 3



An analysis of the respondents by age groups revealed a low Index value among older respondents (see Table 3). Among respondents 55-64 and 65 years and older, the Index value was 0.08.

The most positive attitude towards China was detected among respondents between 18 and 24 years of age (0.18). Among respondents of this age category, the value of all indicators is higher than among older people.

When comparing the Index value among the 18-24 and 65 years and older age groups, there is a significant difference in Index values for all indicators. For example, to the question related to Indicator 1 “How do you personally feel about China as a state?” the answer “Positively” was given by 26.4% of the respondents 18-24, while 19.1% of positive answers came from those aged 65 years and older. To the question “Do you think China has more weight in the world than Russia, or less?”, which is one of 7 questions for Indicator 2, respondents 18-24 gave a positive answer in 45.3% of cases. 28% of respondents aged 65 and older agree that China has greater influence in the world than Russia.

The age groups 25-34 (Index = 0.12), 35-44 (Index = 0.14) and 45-54 (Index = 0.16) are almost unanimous in their opinion of China.

Table 3

**Values of China Perception Index in Kazakhstan by Age Group**

Age Group	Value of China Perception Index	Value for Indicator 1— General Attitude towards China	Value for Indicator 2— China as a Center of Influence	Value for Indicator 3— China as an Investor	Value for Indicator 4— Chinese Culture and Education
18-24	0.18	0.35	0.22	0.30	-0.16
25-34	0.12	0.23	0.22	0.25	-0.22
35-44	0.14	0.25	0.24	0.23	-0.18
45-54	0.16	0.29	0.24	0.28	-0.18
55-64	0.08	0.24	0.19	0.24	-0.32
65 and older	0.08	0.25	0.16	0.23	-0.34

The study reveals that respondents with advanced degrees have a more positive attitude about China (see Table 4). We believe that this is the result of their greater awareness of the current situation in relations between China and Kazakhstan and the fact that cooperation in the field of education is an integral part of China's long-term soft power strategy in Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup>

Table 4

**Values of China Perception Index in Kazakhstan by Education Level**

Education Level	Value of China Perception Index	Value for Indicator 1— General Attitude towards China	Value for Indicator 2— China as a Center of Influence	Value for Indicator 3— China as an Investor	Value for Indicator 4— Chinese Culture and Education
Incomplete secondary (9 grades)	0.11	0.35	0.11	0.25	-0.28
Secondary (10-11 grades)	0.10	0.26	0.11	0.25	-0.24
Secondary vocational (vocational college)	0.09	0.22	0.20	0.22	-0.29
Higher, incomplete higher	0.15	0.28	0.23	0.28	-0.18
Academic degree	0.24	0.40	0.30	0.32	-0.04
Refuse to answer	-0.05	0.00	0.16	0.07	-0.44

<sup>3</sup> See: K. Muratshina, "China-Kazakhstan Cooperation in the Field of Education," in: *12th International Technology, Education and Development Conference (INTED)*, Valencia, Spain, 2018.

The dependence of the degree of awareness on the level of education is confirmed by the respondents' responses related to attitudes towards certain Chinese projects. Thus, to the question "How do you feel about the following Chinese projects and initiatives being implemented in the territory of Kazakhstan? (Western Europe-Western China transport corridor)" only 3.1% of respondents with an academic degree answered "I am unaware of this project." Meanwhile, 22.7% of respondents with incomplete secondary education, 25.7% of respondents with secondary education, 15.3% of people with secondary vocational education, and 12.9% with higher education were unaware of the above-mentioned Chinese project.

The study found that the respondent's occupation has an impact on the perception of China. Among the unemployed, the Index value equaled 0.03, while the survey of school/college students returned the Index value of 0.44 and university students—0.24 (see Table 5).

*Table 5*

**Values of China Perception Index in Kazakhstan by Occupation**

Occupation	Value of China Perception Index	Value for Indicator 1—General Attitude towards China	Value for Indicator 2—China as a Center of Influence	Value for Indicator 3—China as an Investor	Value for Indicator 4—Chinese Culture and Education
Owner of small/medium/large business	0.12	0.24	0.12	0.34	-0.22
Individual entrepreneur	0.12	0.27	0.19	0.20	-0.18
Self-employed (cab driver, tutor, hairstylist, etc.)	0.09	0.22	0.19	0.23	-0.26
Employed in the private sector	0.20	0.31	0.26	0.36	-0.13
Employed in the public sector	0.08	0.20	0.21	0.17	-0.24
Secondary school/vocational college student	0.44	0.64	0.51	0.59	0.02
University student	0.24	0.40	0.27	0.36	-0.08
Retired	0.09	0.29	0.18	0.24	-0.36
Housewife	0.15	0.29	0.24	0.27	-0.21
Unemployed	0.03	0.20	0.18	0.11	-0.36
Disabled	0.33	0.50	0.43	0.38	0.00

High school and college students view China positively throughout all four components of the Index. In this group of respondents, none of the indicators has a negative value.

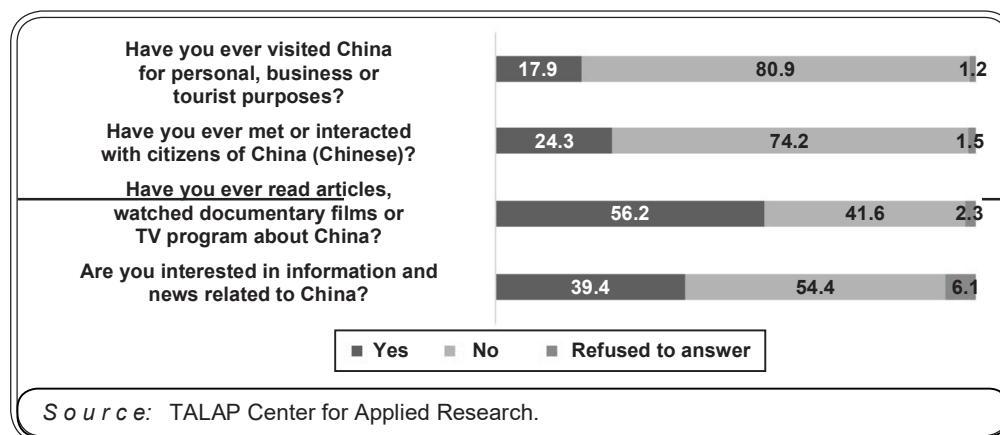
The low value of the Index among the unemployed can be explained by the general negative attitudes of this group and the lack of stable earnings.

Also, the relatively low value of the Index among public sector employees (0.08) is associated with low income and a relatively high workload. In the private sector, wage earners with more convenient work schedules and higher wages, have a much more positive view of China (Index = 0.20). More positive attitudes across all indicators are seen among private sector workers.

Along with the questions included in the China Perception Index indicators, the survey also contained questions to understand the reasons for specific levels of perception of China in Kazakhstan. The study showed that over a third of the respondents are interested in information related to China. Thus, 56.2% have read articles or watched documentaries about China. Almost a quarter of the respondents have experience in communicating with the citizens of the PRC and almost 18% have visited China. 39.4% of respondents are interested in information and news related to China. 11.1% of respondents come across information about the PRC very often, 38.2%—often, 44.2%—rarely and very rarely, 6.6%—do not come across such information at all (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4

Sources of Information about China, %



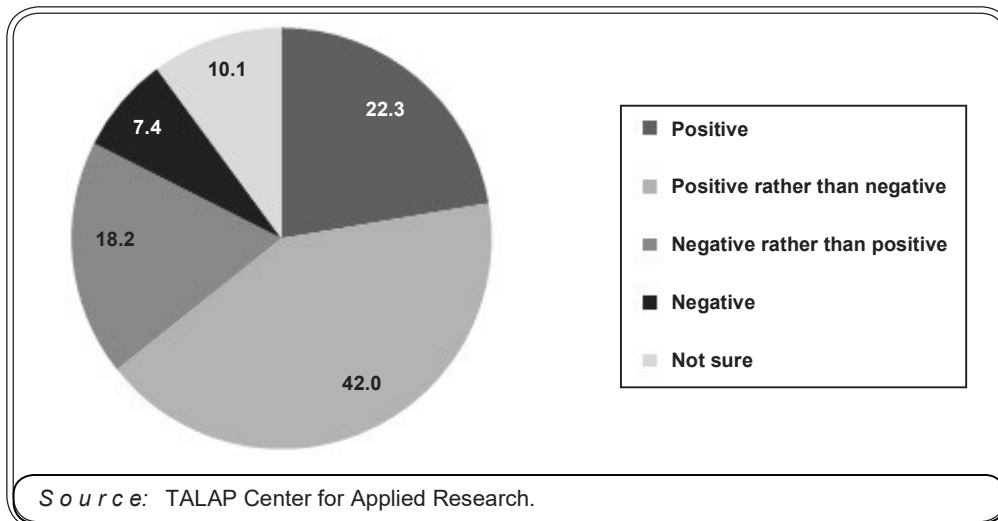
## Indicator 1. General Attitude towards China

Indicator 1 has the highest value (0.27) among the four indicators of the China Perception Index. To assess this Indicator, respondents were asked to answer one question: “Please indicate how you personally feel about China as a whole?” Of all those surveyed, 22.3% said they had a positive attitude towards China. 42% answered that they have a positive rather than a negative attitude towards China, and 35.7% responded that their attitude was negative rather than positive (18.2%), negative (7.4%) and not sure (10.1%) (see Fig. 5).

The Indicator value ranges from 0.03 to 0.51 in different regions. The most negative general attitude towards China is observed in Atyrau (0.03), Aktobe (0.05), Kyzylorda (0.09), Mangystau (0.11) and West Kazakhstan (0.15) regions. The highest value of the Indicator is observed in Kostanay (0.46), East Kazakhstan (0.48) regions and in the city of Shymkent (0.51) (see Fig. 6).

Figure 5

General Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China, %



In a number of regions, the attitude towards China is better than the average for the Republic of Kazakhstan due to less interaction with the citizens of the PRC and a lower probability of competition in the labor market. However, in 2010-2017, about 32% of all issued foreign labor quotas were issued for Chinese citizens.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, since 2015, this indicator has been gradually decreasing, and according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as of 1 July, 2020, the number of Chinese citizens working in Kazakhstan was 4,521.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, to the multiple-choice question, which was not included in the Index components, namely, “Which of the following contributes to your negative attitude towards China?” (respondent can choose up to 3 answer options), only 23% of the respondents responded “Attitude towards Kazakhstani workers at Chinese enterprises.” Also, to a similar multiple-choice question, “What do you think causes the greatest concern among Kazakhstanis with regard to China today?” only 25.1% responded “Labor migration flows.”

The difference in the Indicator value between urban and rural areas is insignificant: 0.27 and 0.26, respectively. The answers of respondents from rural areas are less categorical and tend to be less specific (see Fig. 7).

In addition, the study of the “General attitude towards China” Indicator demonstrated that the women are more optimistic about the PRC. Thus, the value of the indicator for women was 0.31, while for men this indicator returned a value of 0.22.

In terms of education level, as with the general attitude Index, people with an academic degree are the most loyal to China (0.40).

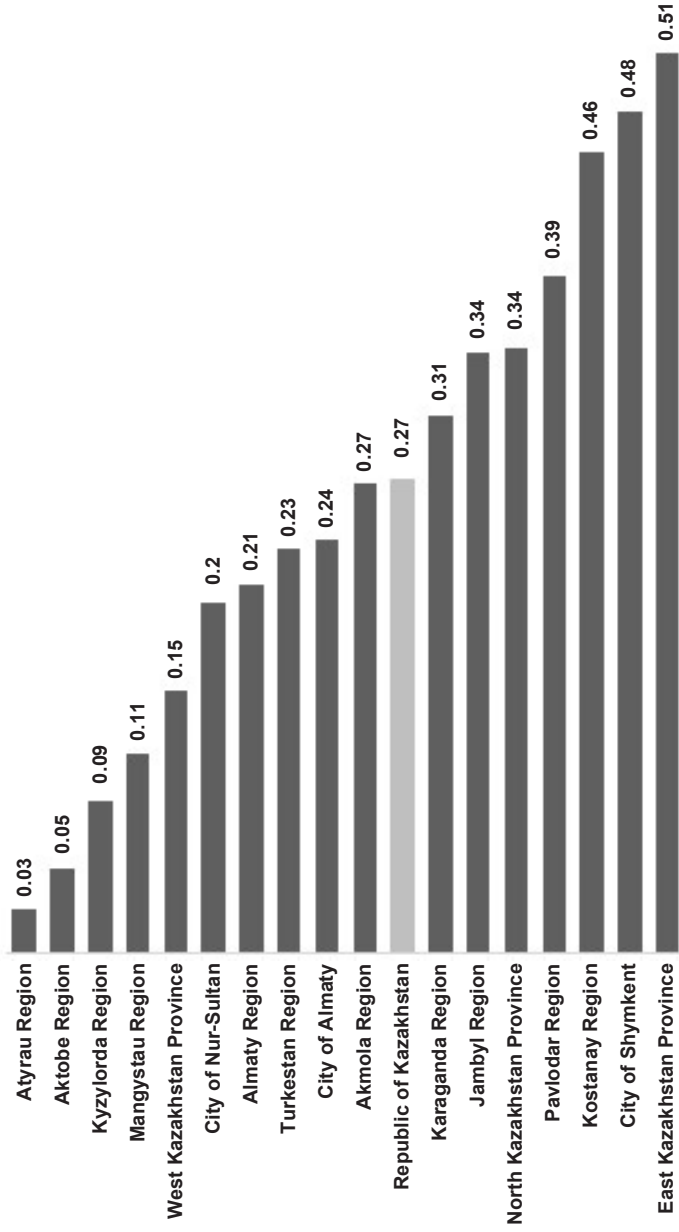
It should be noted that the general attitude towards China in the country is above neutral, regardless of the occupation, social status, level of education, age, and place of residence of the surveyed citizens.

<sup>4</sup> See: “Inostrannyye spetsialisty v Kazakhstane: kto oni i otkuda?” AO “Tsentr razvitiia trudovykh resursov”, 2010-2017, available at [<https://iac.enbek.kz/ru/node/552>], 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ibidem.

Figure 6

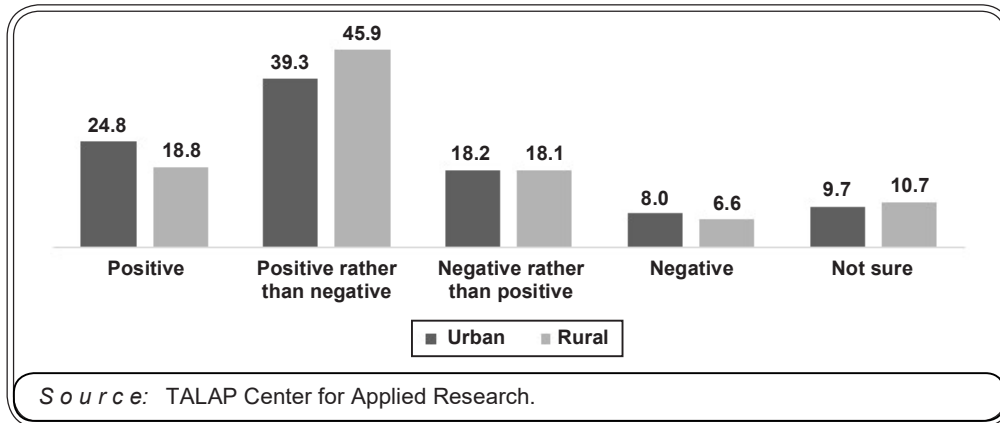
General Attitude of Kazakhstans to China by City and Region



Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.

Figure 7

Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China by Type of Residence (Urban/Rural), %



## Indicator 2. China as a Center of Influence

According to experts, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on China’s macroeconomic performance in 2020. At the same time, China was able to effectively control the epidemic and maintain minimum economic growth, laying a favorable foundation for maintaining the economic growth pace in the medium and long term.<sup>6</sup> Further development of the Chinese economy could become one of the growth factors for the economy of Kazakhstan. This would allow China to be seen by Kazakhstanis as one of the centers of influence.

The value of the “China as a center of influence” indicator was calculated at 0.22 (see Fig. 8). The negative value of the indicator for the question about the potential threat of China for Kazakhstan (–0.08) indicates the respondents’ disagreement with this assumption. So, to the question “Does or does not China pose a threat to Kazakhstan?” 35% of the respondents answered that it does, 43%—that it does not, and 21.7% were unsure.

Also, a negative value (–0.22) was calculated in the responses to the question “Do you think China has more weight in the world than Russia, or less?” 39.3% of respondents answered that China has more weight in the world than Russia, 41.5%—less weight, and 19.2% found it difficult to answer.

In eight regions and two cities of republican significance, Indicator 2 is at or above the national average. In most regions where the indicator is below the national average, the Indicator value is above neutral. Only in the Kyzylorda region, the respondents do not consider China to be a center of influence (see Fig. 9).

In comparison with the rural population, a greater share of the urban population of Kazakhstan considers China to be a center of influence. Thus, according to the results of the survey, in the cities the value of Indicator 2 equals 0.25, in the rural areas—0.17.

<sup>6</sup> See: Xiaoguang Liu, Yuanchun Liu, Yan Yan, “China Macroeconomic Report 2020: China’s Macroeconomy is on the Rebound under the Impact of COVID-19,” *Economic and Political Studies-EPS*, Vol. 8, Issue 4, available at [https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/20954816.2020.1844609?needAccess=true], 2020.

Figure 8

Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China as a Center of Influence

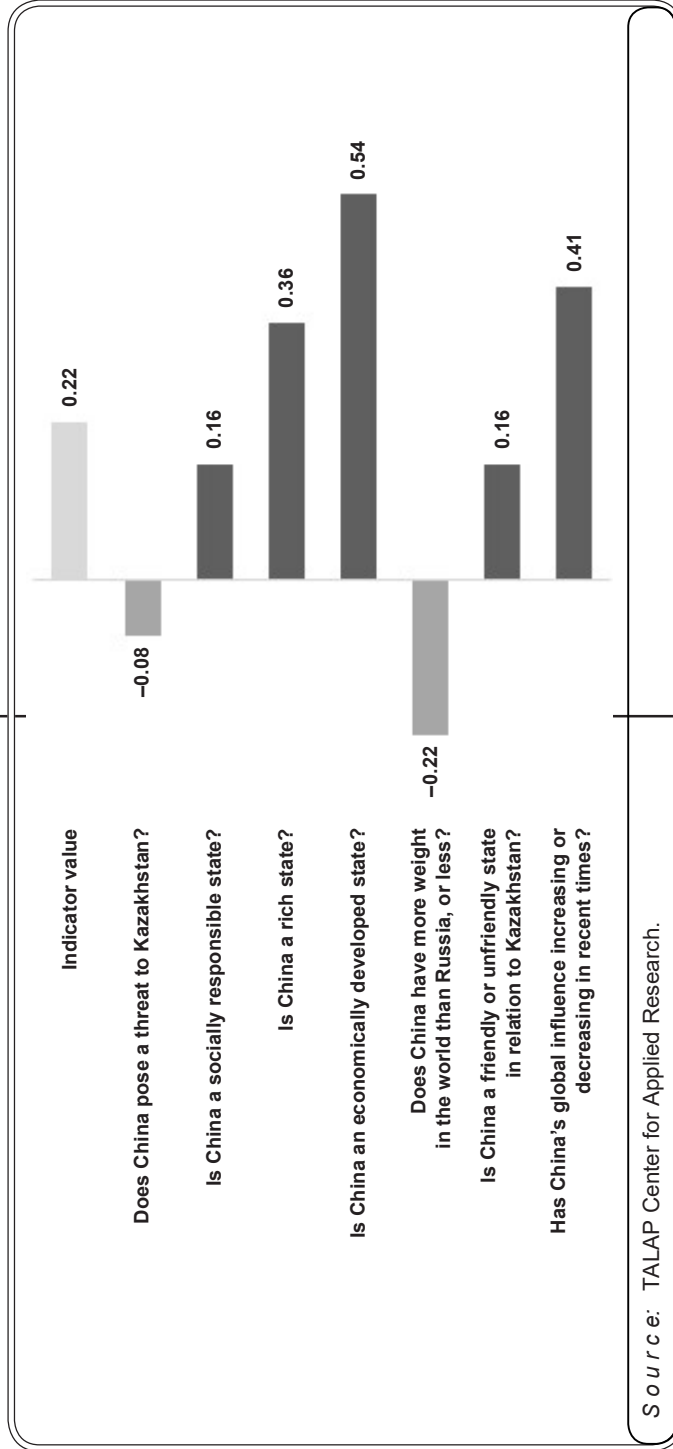
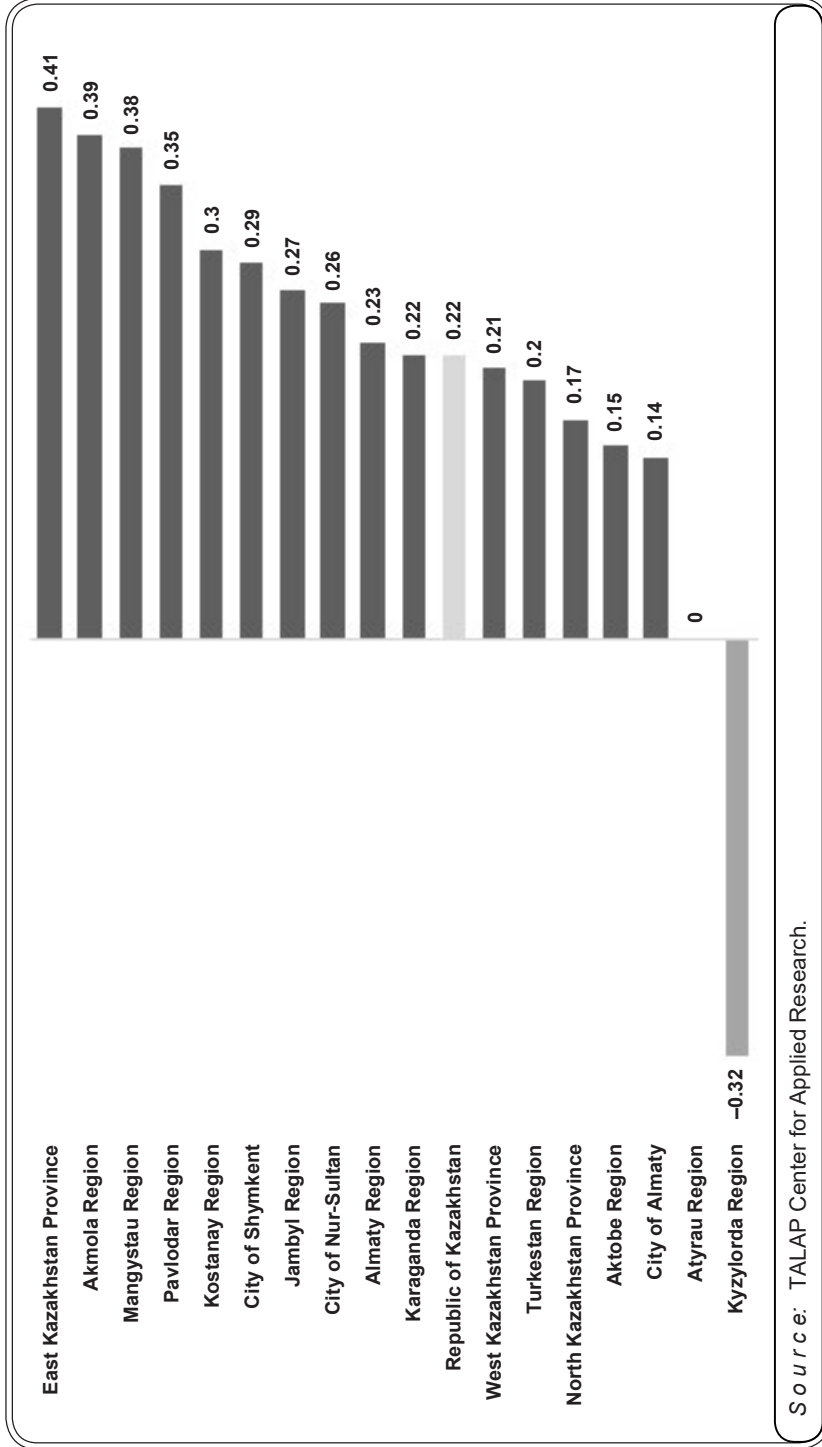




Figure 9

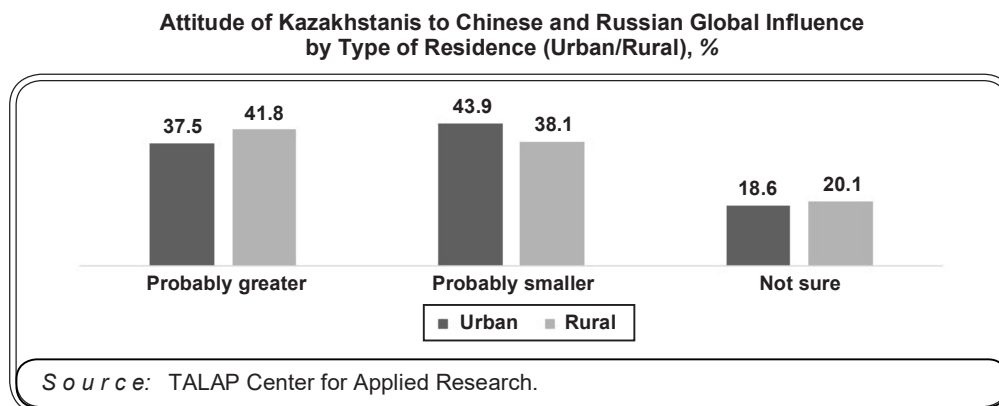
Personal Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China as a Center of Influence by City and Region



Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.

The answers to almost all questions are identical among both urban and rural populations. The exception is the response to the question “Do you think China has more weight in the world than Russia, or less?” Here, the rural population was more inclined to consider Chinese influence stronger than Russian. The urban population’s responses to the remaining questions are more positive. At the same time, in rural areas there are more respondents who were not sure about their response (20.1%), which indicates the lower awareness of the rural population (see Fig. 10).

Figure 10



Also, the value of Indicator 2 “China as a center of influence” of the China Perception Index is below average among older respondents.

The value of Indicator 2, which is below the national average (Indicator 2 = 0.22) among respondents over 55 years old (0.19), is associated with a lower value of responses to the questions “Do you think China has more weight in the world than Russia, or less?” and “Does or does not China pose a threat to Kazakhstan?” (see Fig. 11).

There is no pronounced pattern in the value of Indicator 2 depending on the type of respondents’ occupation. The highest value of the indicator is observed among school/college students (0.51), persons with disabilities (0.43), persons who refused to provide data on occupation (0.36), students (0.27), employees of private sector (0.26) and housewives (0.24).

At the same time, certain experts believe that interactions between Russia, China, and the United States remain highly volatile, especially in the context of the re-establishment of U.S.-Russian relations. Accordingly, Central Asia is becoming an important strategic “platform” for competition for influence between these countries.<sup>7</sup>

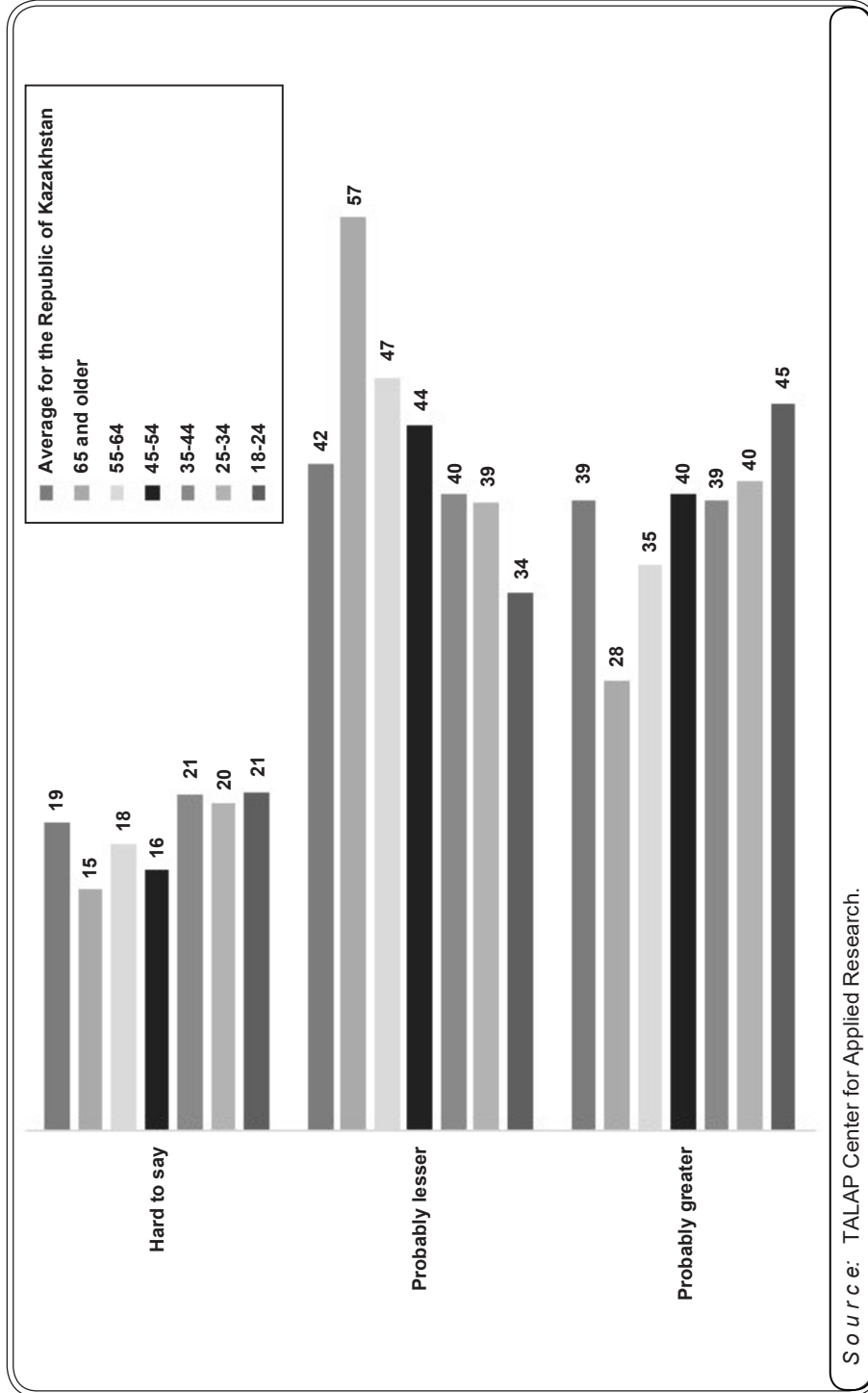
### Indicator 3. China as an Investor (Cooperation)

According to the report of the Eurasian Development Bank, Monitoring of Direct Investments in Eurasian Countries—2014, China’s investments in Eurasian Economic Union countries increased

<sup>7</sup> See: D. Kerr, “Central Asian and Russian Perspectives on China’s Strategic Emergence,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, Issue 1, January 2010, pp. 127-152, available at [<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2010.00872.x>].

Figure 11

Responses to the Question “Do You Think China Has More Weight in the World Than Russia, Or Less?” by Age, %



Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.

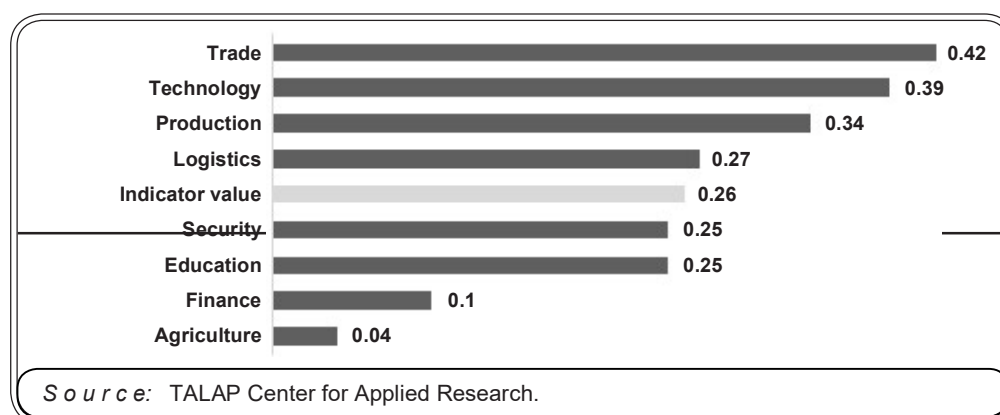
from \$11.02 to \$24.67 billion in 2009-2013. At the same time, Kazakhstan accounted for 95% of investments, or \$22.57 billion.<sup>8</sup>

China is an attractive investor for emerging economies. Accordingly, the value of Indicator 3 in the China Perception Index is important.

The value of Indicator 2 equals 0.26. It should be noted that the values obtained for each of the 8 questions are positive. The respondents are most neutral about the development of cooperation with China in the spheres of security, education, finance, and agriculture. Lower values are associated with people’s fears regarding the Chinese expansion in the above-mentioned spheres. For instance, the issue of land lease by Chinese investors has been topical in the field of agriculture in recent years, while fears of the appropriation of the financial market exist in the financial sphere. The population also believes that the education and security spheres are strategic and require more protection from the state (see Fig. 12).

Figure 12

Attitude of Kazakhstanis to the Prospects of Cooperation with China by Industry



Regionally, the value of Indicator 3 ranges from –0.44 to 0.66. In 7 regions of the country, the value of the Indicator “China as an investor (cooperation)” is above the national average, in 2 regions (Karaganda, Akmola) it is at the average level, in 8 regions—below the average for the Republic of Kazakhstan (see Fig. 13).

In four regions the value of Indicator 3 is neutral or negative. These are Atyrau (0), Aktobe (0), Mangystau (–0.17) and Kyzylorda (–0.44) regions. In these regions, half or more of the Indicator values are negative.

In Kyzylorda oblast, just as in the context of previous indicators, all eight values of Indicator 3 are negative.

There is a slight difference in indicators by type of the respondents’ residence: in urban areas it equals 0.29, which is 0.03 points higher than the national average (0.26), in rural areas—0.22.

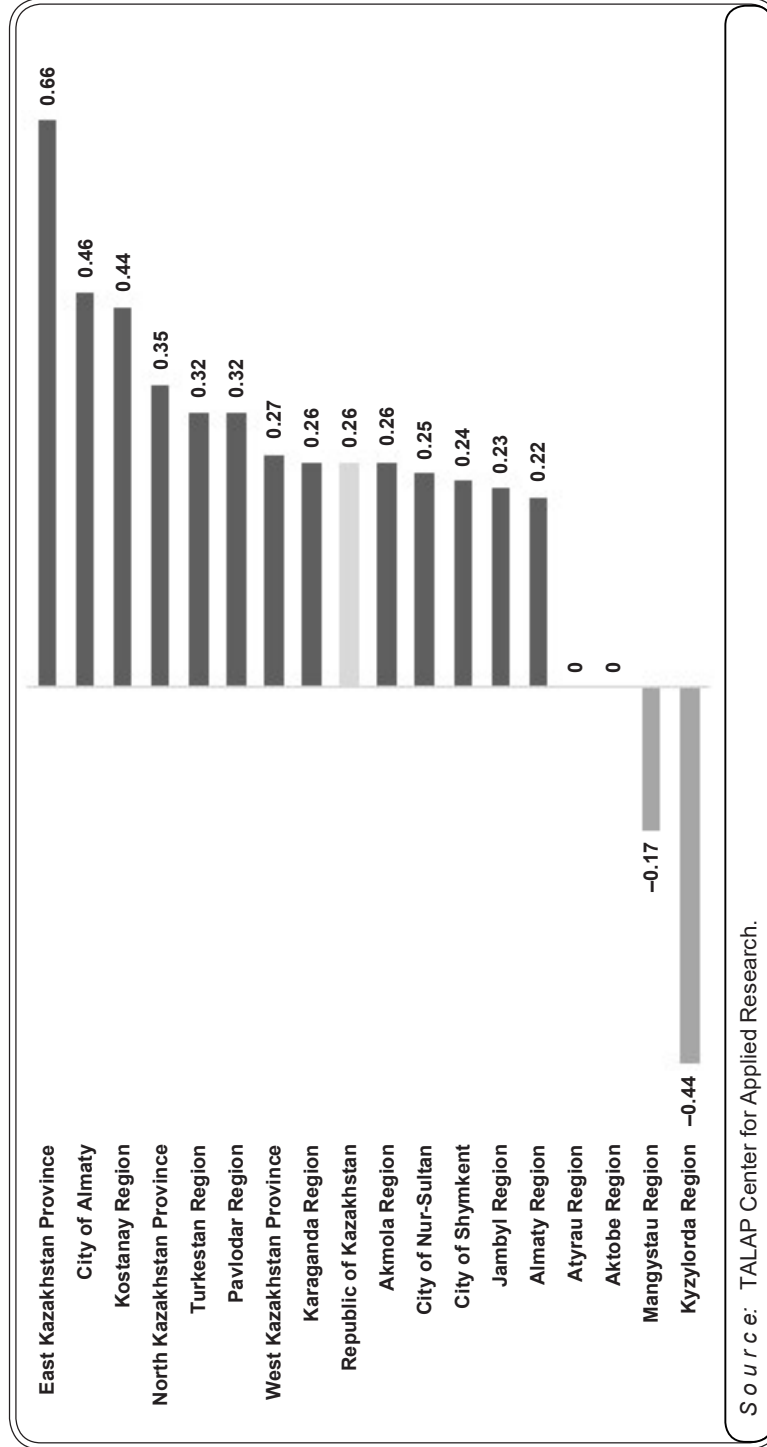
Indicator values also differ slightly by gender. For men, the value of the “China as an investor” Indicator equals 0.23, for women it is 0.28.

If we consider the age factor, the value of the “China as a center of influence” Indicator was below the national average among people over 55 years old, but the distribution of the respondents’

<sup>8</sup> See: “Pochemu investory Kitaia predpochitaiut Kazakhstan?” Tsentri delovoy informatsii Kapital.kz., 2015.

Figure 13

Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China as an Investor by City and Region



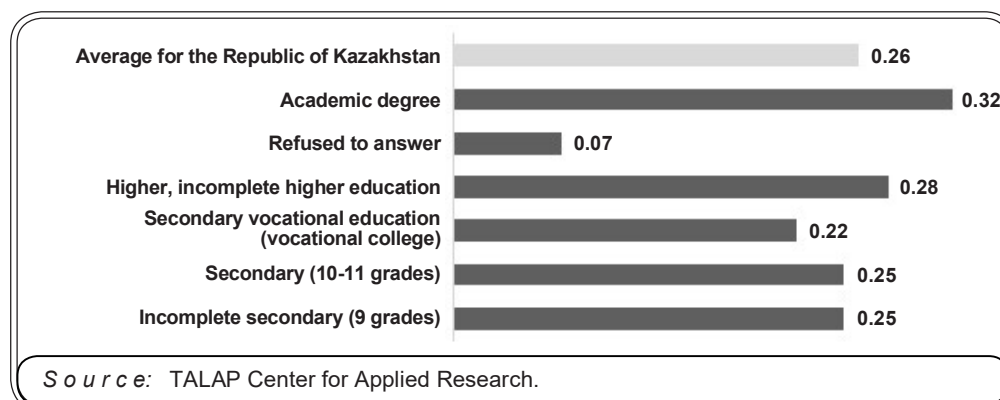
Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.

preferences is slightly different for Indicator 3. The age groups 25-34 and 35-44 also demonstrated a value below the national average. At the same time, it should be noted that only older people show below neutral values of the Indicator (cooperation in the field of agriculture).

The hypothesis about the dependence of the indicator values on the level of education was confirmed when compared with calculations of Indicator 3. Thus, the respondents who completed high school or vocational college returned Indicator values below the national average, while those with a higher education or an academic degree returned higher than average values for Kazakhstan (see Fig. 14).

Figure 14

Attitude of Kazakhstanis to China as an Investor by Education Level



An examination of Indicator 3 values by the type of occupation demonstrates a more pessimistic attitude towards China as an investor on the part of the unemployed (0.11), public sector employees (0.17), individual entrepreneurs (0.2), self-employed (0.23) and pensioners (0.24). In turn, students, college students, persons with disabilities, owners of small and medium-sized businesses and housewives are more optimistic about cooperation with China.

In general, the attitude of the citizens of Kazakhstan towards cooperation with China in various spheres of the economy is positive. People are more cautious in regard to areas of greater strategic importance to national security.

## Indicator 4. Chinese Culture and Education (Soft Power)

The formation of the global education system is one of the most important of the numerous integration processes in the modern world, China included. Education is one of the highest values in the traditional Chinese culture. For instance, the establishment of world-class universities has recently become an important policy and practice in higher education in China.<sup>9</sup> The threshold of the

<sup>9</sup> See: Jia Song, Zhaofeng Chu, Yuwei Xu, "Policy Decoupling in Strategic Response to the Double World-Class Project: Evidence from Elite Universities in China," Higher Education, February 2021, available at [https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00642-y].

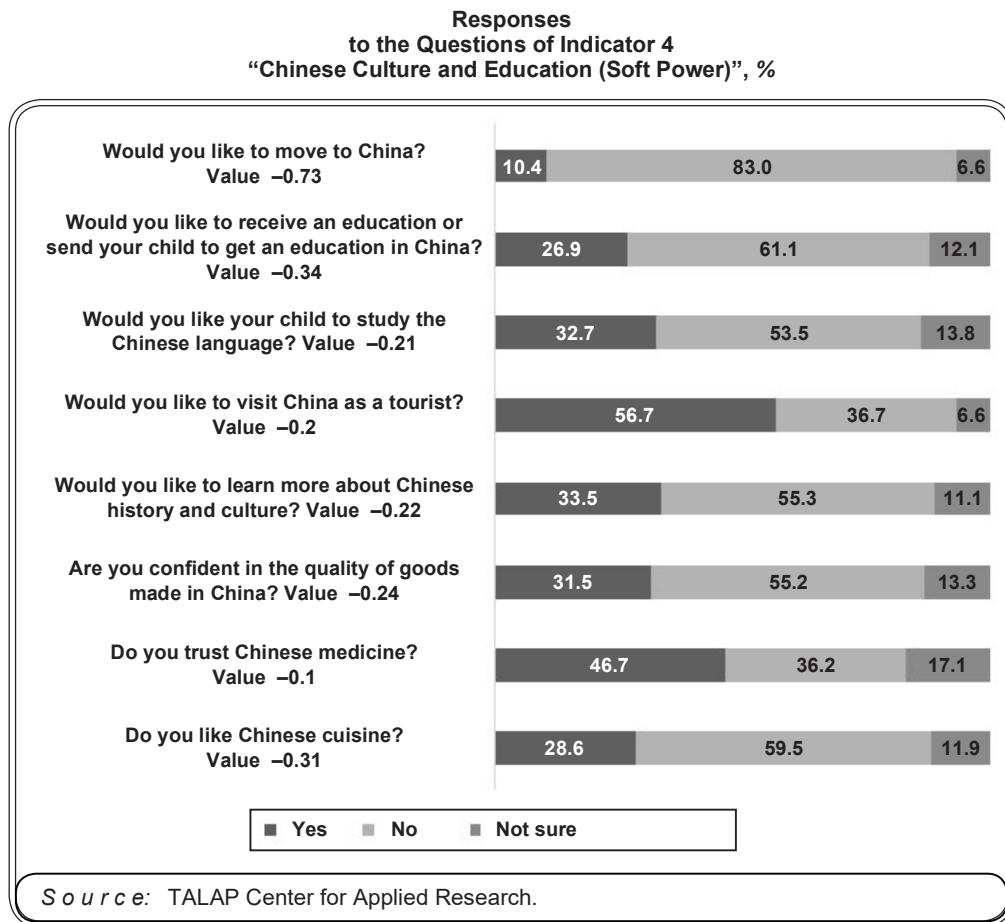
21st century has become the most important for the PRC on its path to integration in the world community. The success of this transition in any state is largely determined by its education policy, which creates conditions for a socio-economic and cultural start.

Indicator 4 “Chinese culture and education (soft power)” aimed to determine the extent to which Kazakhstani society perceives Chinese soft power in the form of education and culture.

The poll yielded a value of  $-0.22$  for Indicator 4, with virtually every value within Indicator 4 being negative.

It should be noted that not many Kazakhstanis like Chinese cuisine. Also negative are the values of indicators associated with a possible move to China, getting an education there, learning the Chinese language, knowledge of Chinese history and culture, as well as the use of Chinese goods. At the same time, the indicator of attitude and trust in Chinese medicine and tourism in China returned a positive value (see Fig. 15).

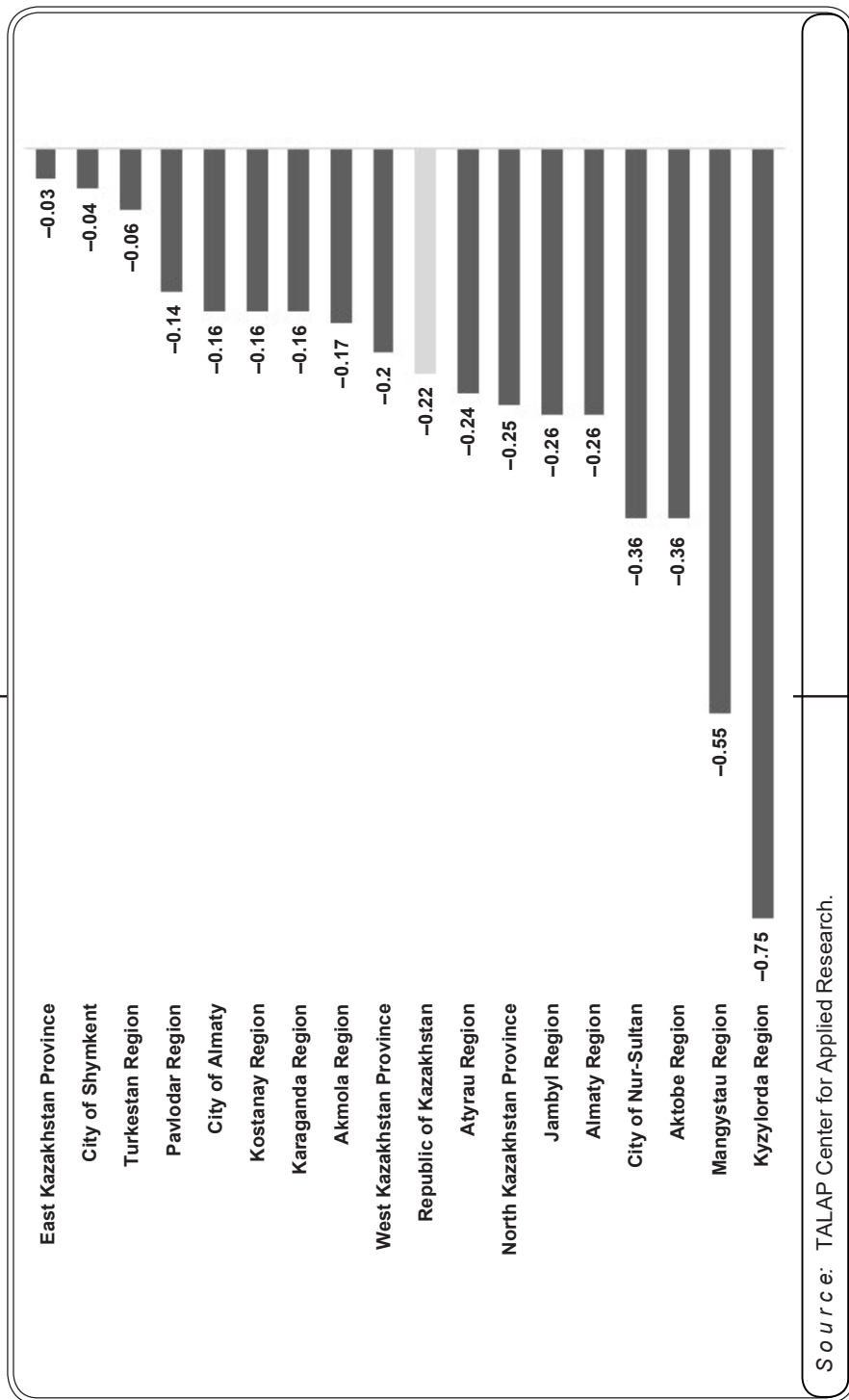
Figure 15



In the regional context, all regions and cities of republican significance showed negative values for Indicator 4 (see Fig. 16).

Figure 16

Values of Indicator 4 "Chinese Culture and Education (Soft Power)" by City and Region



Source: TALAP Center for Applied Research.



Scientists believe that stereotypes about China were also formed by Kazakh repatriates who returned to their homeland under the Nurlı Kosh program.<sup>10</sup> As carriers of both Kazakh and Chinese culture, repatriates brought much from China back to Kazakhstan, including language, new dishes, culture and traditions.<sup>11</sup> The regions with the highest numbers of returnees are less positive about China. Residents of rural and urban areas are aligned in their perception of Chinese culture and education. With the national average of  $-0.22$ , urban dwellers scored  $-0.21$ , while rural dwellers were at  $-0.23$ .

The respondents' answers varied by gender. The value of Indicator 4 among surveyed women is  $-0.17$ , among men is equals  $-0.27$ . The difference in the indicator values between men and women emerged due to different opinions on the study of Chinese by children, visiting China for tourist purposes, confidence in Chinese goods, medicine and cuisine.

Indicator 4 is also negative in respondents from different age groups, occupations and educational levels. Only in individuals with an academic degree ( $-0.04$ ), the value of Indicator 4 is close to neutral.

## Conclusion

At present, China's relations with Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries are at a fairly high level. Experts note that the main obstacle to further development and deepening of relations between China and Central Asia is the image, or rather the knowledge and ideas about China, which have developed in the states and among their populations.<sup>12</sup>

When analyzing relations with China, many experts consider Central Asia as one region, and do not account for the likely differences in attitudes towards China by country. Certain differences in perception can be facilitated by factors like the political system, economic and political situation, geographic location and neighbors, information background and the level of relations with world leaders.

The results of the analysis demonstrate that the image of China and the general attitude towards it in Kazakhstan is also formed by a complex multi-factor combination. In general, there is a high value of the "China as a center of influence (geopolitics and security)" Indicator, which indicates the great importance of the eastern neighbor for Kazakhstan. In the regional context, almost all regions and cities of republican significance, with the exception of Kyzylorda region, demonstrated a higher than neutral value of this Indicator.

Kazakhstanis have a generally positive attitude towards the influence of the PRC, both in the Central Asian region and in the world as a whole. On a 100% scale, with a maximum of  $+1$  and a minimum of  $-1$ , a  $0.22$  value should be equated to a 61% confirmation of the hypothesis about China as a center of influence.

Insufficient information awareness of the Kazakh society creates the foundation for the negative perception and distortion of the current status of attracting foreign labor, including from China.

In the regional context, the value of the China Perception Index ranges from  $-0.36$  to  $+0.39$ . The study showed that such a significant variation in Index values by region is probably related to the duration, scale and history of the presence of Chinese investors in the region. In regions with a Chinese business presence, the Index value is below the national average. Urban population demonstrates

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<sup>10</sup> See: B. Bokayev, S. Zharkynbekova, K. Nurseitova, A. Bokayeva, A. Akzhigitova, S. Nurgalieva, "Ethnolinguistic Identification and Adaptation of Repatriates in Polycultural Kazakhstan," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, No. 11(5), 2012, pp. 333-343, available at [<https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2012.723579>].

<sup>11</sup> See: B. Bokayev, A. Kazhenova, S. Zharkynbekova, G. Beisembayeva, S. Nurgalieva, "Adjustment and Ethno-Lingual Identification of Kazakh Repatriates: Results of Sociolinguistic Research," *Journal of Sociology*, No. 50 (4), 2014, pp. 545-559, available at [<https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783312467095>].

<sup>12</sup> See: Zhao Huasheng, "Sozdanie obraza: kak Kitaiu zakrepitsia v Tsentralnoi Azii," *Yezhegodnik IMI*, Issue 4 (14), 2015.

a more loyal attitude towards China. A higher value of the Index is observed among women, who, in comparison with men (up by 0.10), showed a more loyal attitude towards China.

China has common borders with four Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan). The border spans 2,900 km, of which the Kazakh section is 1,782 km (62%). This topographical contact line cannot but contribute to the involvement of Kazakhstan and China in the development of mutually beneficial relations.

Today, the Republic of Kazakhstan is actively involved in the transformation of the geo-economics of Eurasia. In the future, Kazakhstan will have to make better use of all the new opportunities and prospects. In the coming years, Kazakhstan has yet to critically rethink the complex of broad geo-economic opportunities that are now being formed around the landlocked country.

In general, the results of the study reveal the need for further comprehensive research, improving the information campaign and creating discussion platforms with the participation of non-governmental and international organizations, the expert community, and government agencies.