

Chinese Smartphones: China's Image Boosting Tools in Central Asia

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Abstract. Despite Chinese smartphone vendors' track record in successfully developing and selling communication technologies to the Global South, the potential of Chinese communication technologies to boost the China's image remains under-explored in academic literature. Drawing on the responses from focus groups and individual interviews conducted with the wider public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022, this article will contribute to our understanding of China's image in Central Asia and the role of Chinese smartphones in this regard. I find that competitive pricing, localised marketing, and corporate social responsibility have so far helped Chinese smartphone vendors to improve the Central Asian public's attitudes towards Chinese technologies and China more broadly.

Keywords: China, image making, smartphone vendors, Xiaomi, Central Asia.

On a sunny afternoon in May 2022, Gulnaz and I were sipping tea in the backyard of her family's house in the outskirts of Almaty. During the course of my PhD field research in Kazakhstan in 2019, we had grown very close. So, when the country reopened its borders in Spring 2022, I could not wait to see her again to learn more about how people's lives had changed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Little did I know that the virus had not only changed people's daily habits and as such their use of technology, but that it had also altered their attitudes towards China. Whereas, during my last stay in the country in 2019, anti-Chinese sentiments seemed to be widespread among *Almatinzi* (Russian term for

'Almaty citizens') (Dall'Agnola 2020), in spring 2022, people's opinions about China had improved thanks to their use of Chinese smartphones. Hearing my slight bewilderment about peoples' sudden enthusiasm for China, Gulnaz explained:

You must understand us, Chinese people are very smart. They are not only good in copying any kind of technology, but some Chinese companies, like Xiaomi and OPPO even have the necessary knowhow to produce high-quality smartphones for a much lower price than Apple or Samsung. So, of course, Chinese smartphones and as such China are more popular these days in Kazakhstan and its neighbouring countries.

Gulnaz' explanation seemed convincing to me. Who would not opt for a smartphone that offers the same quality as an iPhone or Samsung but for a more affordable price? In contrast to the situation in the USA and other European countries where the integration of Chinese telecom companies such as Huawei, OPPO and Vivo into critical infrastructure is banned due to security concerns,¹ Chinese smartphones are widely sold and used in Central Asia. The latest data by Global Stats suggest that, while Apple dominates the smartphone markets in Europe and North America, Chinese smartphone vendors outnumber Apple's market shares in Central Asia. Despite that there is little research on the growing popularity of Chinese smartphones in the region. Even less is known about whether Chinese smartphones work to improve China's image in Central Asia.

Guided by the argument that Chinese smartphone vendors can help China to boost its image in the Central Asia, this study seeks to address this gap with regard to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It asks the following questions: Why are Chinese smartphones so popular among Central Asian consumers? And do Chinese smartphones help to improve China's image in the region? By investigating Central Asian citizens' attitudes towards Chinese smartphones in four out of five Central Asian countries,² this article contributes to our understanding of China's image in Central Asia and the role of Chinese smartphones in this regard. Methodologically, the study uses an interpretative qualitative framework that features analysis of empirical data arising from 109 individual interviews (SI) and 37 focus groups (FG) conducted with respondents from the wider urban public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022.

¹ As of September 2023, the US, UK, Australia and more than 10 European countries have adopted measures to restrict or ban Chinese telecom companies from their critical technological infrastructure (Browne 2023; Reuters 2024).

² Turkmenistan had to be excluded from this research because it was impossible for the author to enter the country, not to mention conduct field research there.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Following a brief review of the academic literature on China's soft power tools and the growing popularity of Chinese smartphones in the Global South, I critically assess the Internet and smartphone landscape of the four Central Asian states under study to understand and contextualize the role and impact of Chinese smartphones in shaping public perception of China. I then discuss the methodological approach used in this study before I present the main narratives with regard to Central Asians' perceptions of Chinese mobile phones and the potential of these phones to improve China's image in the region.

ICTs, China's Soft Power Tools

Several concepts can be helpful when studying China's image internationally, with 'soft power' being the most famous and commonly used. The term 'soft power' was coined by Nye (1990) and describes a country's ability to influence people and states through attraction or persuasion (rather than through coercion via military means). Soft power involves leading by example, and consists primarily of three resources: culture, political institutions and a country's foreign/domestic policy (Nye 1990). Domestic and foreign policies that conflict with the values or policies of other nations can harm the impact of soft power, just as policies that are in-line with other nations' ways of thinking can strengthen it (Nye 2004, 12-14).

For a country to persuade other states and improve its image, its messages and moral values have to be showcased in the right channels. In this context, soft power theory pays particular attention to the role that information and communication technology play. According to Nye (1990), with the rise of an information-based economy, power is passing from actors who are 'capital rich' to those who are 'information rich'. Thus, the "capacity for timely response to new information" (Nye 1990, 164; Nye 2023, 10), meaning the capacity for effective communication, becomes a critical resource for soft power. As such, it is those countries "with the most access to multiple channels of communication and those with more influence over how issues are framed" that are likely to gain soft power in the information age (Nye 2002, 70). Today, more than five billion people use their smartphones to access information online (Data Reportal 2024). In such a world, information communication technologies can help to attract and persuade others.

China is aware of the potential of information communication technologies (ICTs hereafter) to enhance its soft power, and thus its ability to attract the interest and trust of other states (Dai 2022). Chinese telecom

companies are seen by the Chinese leadership as key to increasing the country's influence in technology, industry, standards and legal frameworks (Mochinaga 2020). According to previous scholarship (Shen 2018) Chinese IT companies do not operate in isolation but in tandem with Chinese leadership's geostrategic objectives. Since the leadership in Beijing views the technological sphere, including telecom infrastructure, as the only sector where China can engage in direct competition with the United States without creating direct confrontation, including possible military confrontation (Cheney 2019; Hillman 2021), the country has invested heavily in the development of mobile phone technologies that meet the needs of the growing consumer markets in the low- and low-middle income countries of the Global South. As a result, as of February 2024, home-grown Chinese smartphone brands such as Xiaomi, OPPO, VIVO and Huawei made up four of the top six global smartphone brands (Global Stats February 2024). While Samsung and Apple continue to outnumber Chinese mobile phone companies in terms of market share in North America and Western Europe, Chinese smartphones dominate the markets in Asia and Africa.

Chinese telecoms equipment manufacturers —through competitive pricing, low production costs, cost-effective equipment and solutions, and access to Chinese state-subsidized funding and support—have penetrated and dominated Africa's and Southeast Asia's telecom sectors, wresting market share from major non-Chinese firms, such as Samsung, Apple and Nokia. For example, Chinese smartphone makers occupy almost 80 percent of India's and 70 percent of Indonesia's mobile phone market (Mallik and Malvania 2023; Yee 2023). In Nigeria, Africa's largest economy, Chinese smartphones account for around 80 percent of the smartphone market (Gerro 2023). Nigeria, Indonesia and India are not only among the world's most populous countries, but they are also home to the largest 'unconnected' populations worldwide, with 730 million people in India, 97 million people in Nigeria and 63 million people in Indonesia still not using the Internet in 2023 (Kemp 2023). As such the potential for growth of these smartphone markets is huge, offering immense opportunities and financial gain for Chinese smartphone companies in the coming years.

Similar to Africa and Southeast Asia, the demand for mobile devices in Central Asia is expected to rise, providing Chinese telecommunications companies with new innovative tools to 'better communicate the country's [peaceful] message' (Zheng 2022) and as such to improve China's image in the region. Information communication technologies seem crucial to improve China's image in the region, because so far, the country's attempts to promote its soft power and image through economic investments, cultural diplomacy, exchange/scholarship programs and Con-

fucius institutes, has been less successful (Aliyev 2019; Yau 2021). Rather than improving the country's image, previous soft power instruments have been found to fuel sinophobic sentiments among the wider Central Asian public (Karibayeva 2020; Arynov 2022). As such, Chinese smartphone vendors could be useful advocates to enhance China's image if the message that they promote is attractive to Central Asian people and serves their interests. Thus far, we know neither what messages Chinese telecom companies are promoting, nor if those ideas resonate well among the Central Asian public. The potential of Chinese smartphones to improve China's image in Central Asia remains underexplored in the existing literature. In using the case study of the four Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, this article seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Internet Access and Chinese Smartphone Vendors in Central Asia

For mobile phone vendors to influence China-related attitudes and as such improve China's image in the region, Central Asians must have access to smartphones. Several factors, including telecommunications infrastructure and Central Asians' attitudes towards Chinese technologies, all affect the degree to which Chinese mobile phone devices are popular in Central Asia.

The speed at which telecommunications infrastructure and mobile Internet penetration have expanded in Central Asia is so remarkable that scholarship on Internet culture in the region published prior to the Covid-19 pandemic barely reflects the current situation. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, mobile Internet access has skyrocketed in Central Asia. Internet penetration in Kyrgyzstan has increased from 40 percent in 2019 to almost 80 percent in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). The most recent data on Uzbekistan suggests that the rate of Internet users has increased from 47 percent in 2019 to more than 83 percent in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). In the same period, Internet access rose in Kazakhstan from 74 percent of the population in 2019 to 92.3 percent in January 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). Even Tajikistan, the poorest state in Central Asia, reports that almost 42 percent of the population enjoys daily access to the Internet in 2024 (Data Reportal 2024). The pandemic has also led to an increased use of digital payment tools in Central Asia. For example, by the end of 2022, 22 million people were using digital payment tools in Uzbekistan (Dobrynin 2022). In the same period, the volume of cash-less transactions increased by 85 percent in Kyrgyzstan and by 50 percent in Tajikistan (Akchabar 2022; Zhorshanbaev 2022). Similar to its neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan's vol-

ume of cashless transactions has skyrocketed from a mere of US 5 billion in 2017 to US 158 billion in 2022 (Fintech in Kazakhstan report 2023).

According to the Central Asia Barometer Survey Wave 8 (2020) the device most frequently used by Central Asians to access the Internet and to carry out cashless payments continues to be their mobile phone. More than 70 percent of respondents in Uzbekistan, almost 60 percent of respondents in Tajikistan, and more than 81 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan indicated that they use their mobile phones to access the Internet rather than desktop or tablet computers. This is due to the fact that many people cannot afford computers and because mobile internet in the rural areas is often more accessible to users than home lines (Dall'Agnola and Wood 2022). Mobile Internet also allows for quicker access to constantly changing virtual private networks (VPNs) in Central Asia. A stable access to VPN is a must for Central Asians. Regimes across the region are known for using various high-tech tools such as smart filtering and hacking spyware (e.g., Pegasus and UK FinFisher) to monitor their citizens' activities online (Dall'Agnola 2023).

Alongside growing mobile Internet and electronic payment use, Central Asians' support for the use of Chinese technologies in their country seems to have increased. According to the Central Asia Barometer Wave 11 (2022), as of 2022, more than 60 percent of respondents in Kazakhstan and more than 70 percent of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan approved of the use of Chinese technologies in their country. For more details, please see Figure 1 on the next page.

Unfortunately, the Central Asia Barometer did not survey people's attitudes towards Chinese technologies in Tajikistan. However, previous research found that Tajikistanis display more favourable attitudes towards China in general because Tajikistan has fewer economic partners to rely on than its neighbours (Laruelle and Royce 2020; Dall'Agnola *forthcoming*). As such, it seems safe to assume that the wider public in Tajikistan welcomes the use of Chinese technologies in their country.

The latest data by Global Stats (2024) on mobile phone vendors in Central Asia for the year of 2022 confirms the trends identified by the Central Asia Barometer Wave 11 in as much as it shows that Chinese smartphone companies' market shares have skyrocketed in the region since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Figure 2 on the following page illustrates various smartphone vendors' market shares in Central Asia from 2018 to 2022.

While Huawei was the first Chinese telecom company to enter the Central Asian smartphone market in the early 2010s (Hashimova 2020), Huawei is no longer among the leading four vendors in the four Central Asian countries. In the span of just a few years since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Chinese smartphone maker Xiaomi has

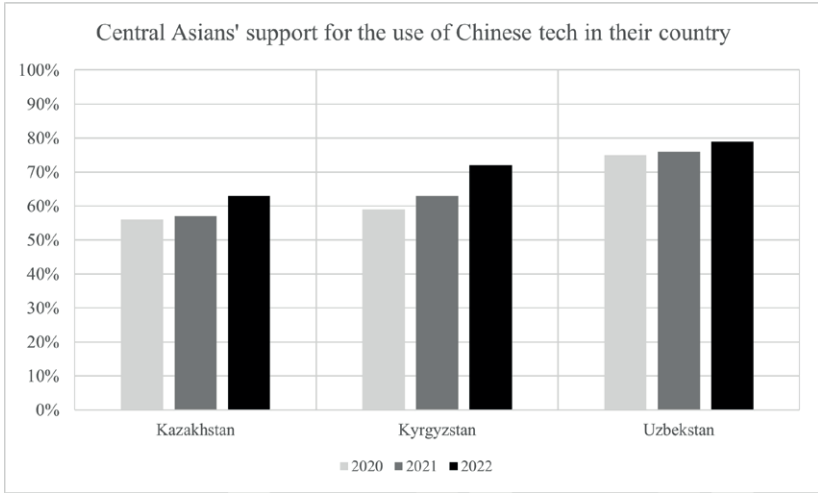


Figure 1. Central Asians' support for the use of Chinese technologies in their country. Source: Central Asia Barometer (2020-2022).

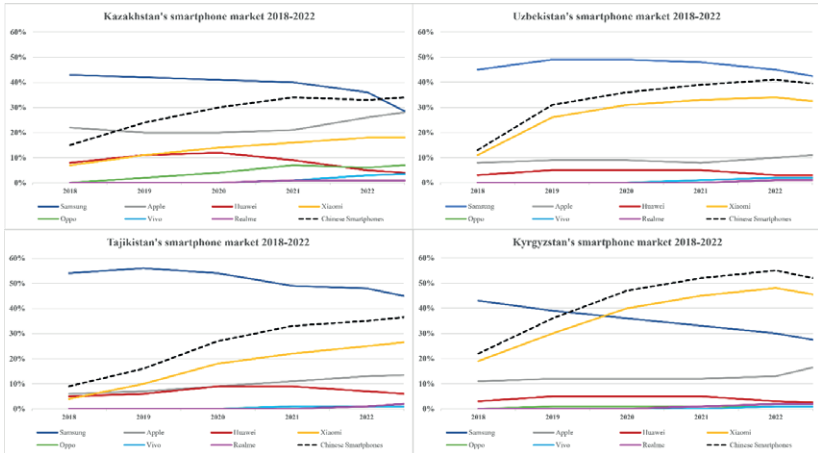


Figure 2. Smartphone vendors' market shares in Central Asia from 2018 to 2022. Source: Global Stats (2024).

overtaken Huawei's market share and is now the most popular Chinese smartphone brand in Central Asia. By the end of 2022, all Chinese smartphone vendors combined controlled 55 percent of Kyrgyzstan's mobile phone market (see the black dotted line for Kyrgyzstan in Fig-

ure 2). Whereby the Chinese telecom company Xiaomi had the largest market share in smartphones with almost 50 percent. While Samsung continues to be the most popular smartphone brand in Uzbekistan (45 percent) and Tajikistan (48 percent), the company lost substantial market share to its Chinese rival Xiaomi amidst the pandemic. Xiaomi increased its market share in Uzbekistan from 11 percent in 2018 to 34 percent in 2022. In the same period, the tech company managed to increase its popularity sixfold in Tajikistan, from 4 percent in 2018 to 25 percent in 2022. In contrast to its neighbouring countries, Kazakhstan's smartphone market continues to be dominated by Samsung and Apple. As of 2022, all Chinese smartphone vendors combined (see black dotted line in Figure 2) only occupied 33 percent of Kazakhstan's mobile phone market, where Xiaomi held 18 percent.

In short, as the Covid-19 pandemic increased Central Asians' demand for mobile devices, the expansion of Chinese smartphones accelerated and public attitudes towards Chinese technologies improved. The recent growth of communication technologies and the growing popularity of Chinese mobile devices all raise important questions about China's image in the region. Why are Chinese smartphones so popular among Central Asian consumers? And do Chinese smartphones help to improve China's image in the region? To answer these questions, this study uses interview data, as the following section shows.

Methodology

To my knowledge there is so far no academic research on the question of what impact the popularization of Chinese smartphones has on China's image in Central Asia. This study seeks to address this gap with regard to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It uses an interpretative qualitative frame that features analysis of empirical data arising from individual interviews and focus groups conducted with respondents from the wider urban public in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent between May and October in 2022. The group and individual interviews were initially conducted as part of the data collection process for my postdoctoral project on the implication of the Covid-19 pandemic on smart city technologies in Central Asia. To measure individuals' attitudes towards Chinese smartphones, the following question was asked during the interviews: "Please tell me what smartphone brand you use and why?" Following previous scholarship (Voon and Xu 2020), I therefore measure China's image based on Central Asians' public perception of China, in my case their attitudes towards Chinese smartphones.

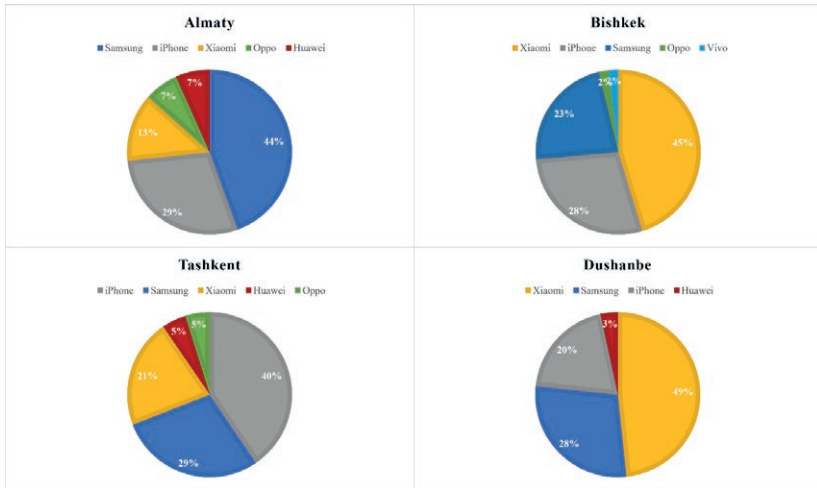


Figure 3. Respondents' smartphone preferences in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent in 2022.

Interview participants were successfully recruited through existing and associated contacts and through so-called “insider” recruiting (Krueger and Casey 2015, 85). Insiders recruited their relatives, friends, and working colleagues. Using pre-existing social groups allowed for the incorporation of participants from diverse educational and social backgrounds (students, professionals, entrepreneurs, office workers, receptionists, cleaning ladies, taxi drivers, market salespersons, nurses, etc.) and facilitated a generally relaxed atmosphere during the interviews. Overall, I conducted 37 focus groups (consisting of six or fewer people) and 109 individual interviews that yielded a stratified sample of 210 individuals ranging in age from 18 to 71 years old.

Figure 3 above illustrates respondents' smartphone preferences in Almaty, Bishkek, Dushanbe and Tashkent respectively. The descriptive results in Figure 3 support the latest figures by Global Stats (2024) presented in Figure 2 in as much as they show that Xiaomi was identified by my respondents to be the most popular Chinese mobile phone provider in Central Asia in 2022. While 49 percent of my interview partners in Dushanbe and 45 percent of my respondents in Bishkek reported using a Xiaomi smartphone, Samsung and Apple phones were more popular among my interviewees in Almaty and Tashkent. Apple and Samsung's popularity can be explained by the fact that the urban population in these two cities is more economically well-off and more tech-savvy than their

counterparts in Bishkek and Dushanbe. Despite this, almost 30 percent of respondents in Almaty and Tashkent reported that they use a Chinese smartphone in 2022. So how comes that Chinese smartphones are more and more popular in Central Asia? Drawing on the interview data that I collected in the region in 2022, the following two sections seek to discuss this question in more detail.

China, the Friendly Tech Power

As previously discussed, Chinese IT companies only help to improve China's image in a given country if the message that they promote is attractive to the citizens of this country. I found that Chinese smartphone companies' missions "to empower and evaluate society through technology" (OPPO 2023), "technology 4 all" (Huawei 2023) and "to let everyone in the world enjoy the beautiful life brought by technology" (Xiaomi, see Xu 2021) seem to resonate with Central Asian consumers. Indeed, China was often described by my respondents as a "friendly tech power"³ that provides Central Asian consumers with affordable high-end communication technologies that enable them to make a decent living.

"There is no doubt that Chinese technology firms offer people like us a lifeline in sustaining our businesses," Thamina a 31-year-old IT Developer from Dushanbe explained. According to Thamina and other Tech professionals, the high uptake of e-commerce and social media content creation in Central Asia is largely driven by the availability of high-quality smartphones that are affordable to the masses. Similar to Gulnaz in the introduction, my urban dwellers were convinced that Chinese smartphones are gaining in popularity among consumers in Central Asia, because they are "smart and cheap."⁴ VIVO, Realme, and Xiaomi dominate the market for low-end devices that cost less than USD 200, and OPPO leads in mid-range models between USD 200 and USD 400. In contrast, an iPhone 13 Pro Max (market price USD 1200) costs more than double the average salary in Kazakhstan and over three times of the monthly average salary in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Uzreport 2022). Many Central Asians need to borrow money from the bank to buy a smartphone, making competitors like Samsung and Apple too expensive for most. Under these conditions, even youngsters who work in the tech sector, like Amir, a 27-year-old programmer from Tashkent, opt for a Chinese device because of its reasonable price:

³ Barber aged 42 from Almaty, May 5, 2022.

⁴ PC mechanic aged 47 from Dushanbe, July 7, 2022.

Instead of paying more than 1000 USD for an iPhone, I can buy a Xiaomi which offers me the same user experience as an iPhone but for a more reasonable price.⁵

Chinese smartphones are more popular among Central Asian consumers not only because of their competitive prices, but also because they give access to the same if not more apps and functions than the pricier alternatives offered by Samsung and iPhone. For example, Aynura, a 54-year-old language teacher from Bishkek, argued that certain mobile phone apps have more functions on a Xiaomi than on an Apple smartphone. During the interview, Aynura voiced her frustration about the fact that some of the apps that she needs for her work as teacher are either limited or do not exist on her new iPhone 13. Since she urgently needs these apps for her work, she had to buy herself a second phone, a Redmi 8 from Xiaomi's budget smartphone line. Indeed, as we can see in Figure 4, Aynura's favourite translation app provides her with twice as many editing options and functions on her Xiaomi smartphone (on the left) than on her iPhone 13 (on the right).

Another possible explanation for why people purchase Chinese smartphones, is Central Asian parents' fear that their toddler may accidentally break their Samsung or iPhone. According to them, Apple and Samsung phones are "so perishable these days"⁶ especially in a child's hands. In this context, some parents, like Serik, a 43-year-old taxi driver and father from Almaty, describe Chinese smartphones as a great indestructible and waterproofed alternative to Samsung and Apple (see his quote below).

I have tried many different smartphones in my life. However, at the end Xiaomi convinced me the most, not only because of its slow price, but also due to its performance and indestructibility. What I mean by indestructibility? For example, my daughter accidently dropped her Xiaomi Redmi 6 twice in the water. And guess what, it still works fine! I only once split a little bit of water over my former Samsung Galaxy and I had to buy a new one. This is what I mean by indestructibility.

As we can see from the quote above, Serik had tried many different smartphone brands, but in the end Xiaomi convinced him the most because of its low price, performance ratio and durability. While the Xiaomi Redmi 6 phone of his four-year-old daughter seemed to be indestructible even after his daughter had accidently dropped it twice in the water, Serik was forced to replace his Samsung Galaxy after he had accidently spilt a bit of water over it.

⁵ IT Programmer aged 27 from Tashkent, June 14, 2022.

⁶ Accountant and mother, aged 35, of a six-month-old boy from Dushanbe, July 18, 2022.

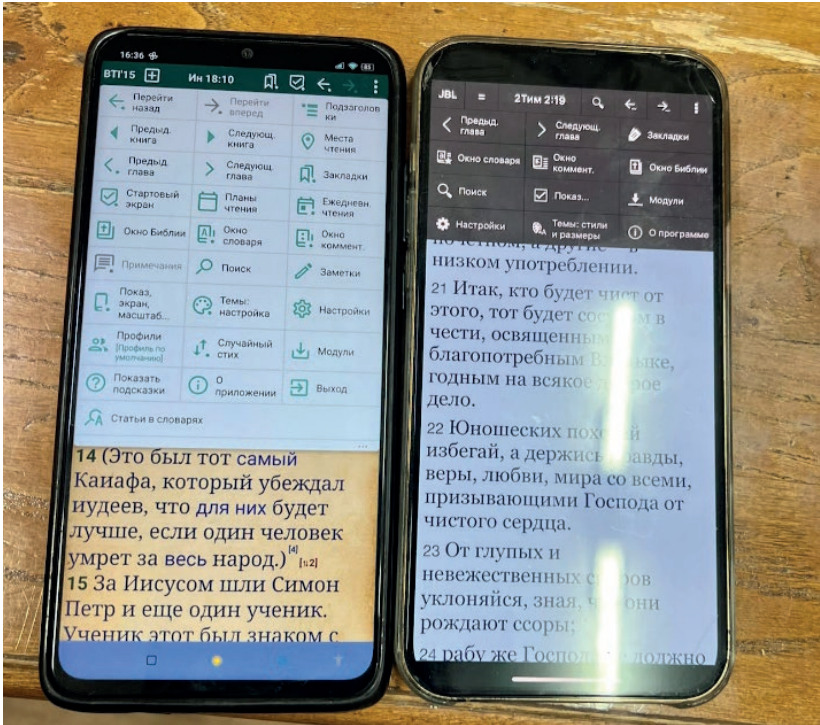


Figure 4. Photo of Aynura's favourite translation app on her Redmi 8 (left) and iPhone 13 (right).

So while once viewed by many Central Asians as low-quality knock-offs, Chinese mobile devices, and as such Chinese technology firms, are no longer perceived as subpar counterfeits to US and Korean technology companies. According to my respondents, the label 'Made in China' no longer equates to "low quality but rather affordable and high-end technology."⁷ As such, Chinese smartphone vendors have not only seemed to alter Central Asians' views about Chinese technologies, but also about Chinese companies and as such China more broadly.

Localised Branding and Marketing Strategy

For a country to persuade other states, its message and products have to be showcased in the right channels. Chinese smartphone companies

⁷ Housewife aged 39 from Tashkent, June 17, 2022.

seem to comprehend this and have master this strategy in Central Asia. With around half of Central Asia's population now under 30 years old (Khashimov et al. 2020), Chinese telecom companies have tailored their products and marketing strategy to meet the needs of the increasingly young smartphone user base in Central Asia. Since Instagram is the region's most popular social media tool among people under 30 (Dall'Ag-nola 2022), Chinese smartphone companies actively curate and promote their products on Instagram. For example, a scroll through the 163,000 followers on OPPO's Kazakhstan account reveals many of the key players in Kazakhstan's pop culture and entertainment industries – from Ulutay, a popular Kazakh folk metal-trio, to the Kazakh national singer Dimash Kudaibergen (Krylova 2023). Both act as brand ambassadors for OPPO in a country where celebrity and blogger ambassadors yield significant influence. In Uzbekistan, the Chinese smartphone company VIVO has partnered with the famous Uzbek singer Shahlo Ahmedova (@shahloahmedova), who has almost 3 million followers on her Instagram account.

Chinese tech vendors' strategies to hire local celebrities seems to attract Central Asian youth. Many young people I interviewed, like Rustem, a 28-year-old journalist from Almaty, argued that they had purchased a Chinese smartphone because their idol, in his case Dimash Kudaibergen, had recommended it to their fans and followers on social media. In honour of the Central Asian new year celebration Nowruz in March 2023, the Chinese smartphone company OPPO launched a competition for OPPO customers to win a photo session with Kudaibergen. Figure 5 shows Dimash Kudaibergen's paid-Instagram post in which he advertises the competition for OPPO customers to win a meet-and-greet with him. Kudaibergen's collaboration with the Chinese mobile phone company OPPO seems to be no coincidence. Dimash Kudaibergen is a well-known celebrity in China and even performed a Kazakh folk song "Oh, Zhailau" (Kazakh for 'My Steppe') at China Central Television's Chinese New Year Gala in January 2023 (The Astana Times 2023).

In addition to their collaboration with local celebrities and bloggers, Chinese smartphone companies celebrate Central Asian languages, culture, traditions and food in their social media campaigns. For example, VIVO showcases its newest smartphone V27 in front of Uzbek embroidery or food (@vivo_Uzbekistan) and Xiaomi and OPPO publish all their marketing posts in local languages as well as in Russian. In the spirit of decentring the study of Central Asia from Russia (Marat and Kassymbekova 2023), Chinese smartphone vendors also do no longer use Russian as the main language of communication in their social media marketing campaigns in the region.

In the same vein, Chinese smartphone vendors have also invested resources in local communities. Since 2016 the Chinese telecom compa-



Figure 5. Paid-Instagram post by Dimash Kudaibergen: ‘Hello folk! Would you like to spend Nowruz together with me?’ Source: @Kudaibergenov.dimash, March 16, 2023.

ny Huawei and the Tashkent University of Information Technology have been working together to run a special program, called “1000 Talents” that seeks to educate Uzbek educators and students in IT technologies (Hashimova 2020; Huawei Tech 4 Good 2024). Furthermore, as part of its “Seeds for the Future” programme, Huawei has offered more than 300 STEM students from Central Asia the opportunity to visit and study in China since the company first launched the program in the region in the early 2010s (Huawei Seeds for the Future 2024). In addition to its global corporate social responsibility flagship program, in July 2023, Huawei announced the launch of a new Instructor Enablement camp that seeks to promote and empower Central Asia’s ICT talent ecosystem (Zawya 2023). As of today, 230 Huawei ICT academies have been established in the Middle East and Central Asia regions, while over 46,000 trainees have passed Huawei exams.

Moreover, Chinese technology manufacturers are also creating employment opportunities for young professionals, like Loiq, who used to work as an IT expert for Xiaomi in Dushanbe. “I used to work for Xiaomi and this was an eye-opening experience for me.” While working for Xiaomi, Loiq realised how much time and money his employer spent on localising its workforce and researching Central Asian consumers’ needs. According to Loiq, “all this really changed my way of thinking about Chinese companies and China more generally.”

In short, Chinese mobile phone companies' investments in local communities and their localised marketing strategies have helped them to win over the hearts and wallets of Central Asian youth.

Conclusion

The narratives arising from the individual and group interviews with the wider urban public in Tashkent, Almaty, Bishkek and Dushanbe support the recent data by Global Stats (2024) in as much as they suggest that Chinese mobile phone providers such as Xiaomi have become more popular among Central Asian consumers since the outbreak of Covid-19. In some countries, like Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese smartphone company Xiaomi already has the largest market share in mobile phones. However, as I have tried to show in this essay, the recent popularity of Chinese mobile devices cannot solely be credited to the fact that they are more affordable to the wider public than other smartphone brands. Rather, this is also due to Chinese vendors' efforts to localise their branding strategies and workforces. Competitive pricing, localised marketing, and corporate social responsibility have so far helped Chinese smartphone companies to sell their smartphones and to improve their image to a certain extent. Until rivals like Apple and Samsung begin devising more effective marketing strategies, it seems unlikely that China's growing dominance over the Central Asian smartphone market will be challenged anytime soon.

Moreover, the results presented here for Central Asia also seem to suggest that Chinese smartphone vendors are helpful advocates in China's struggle to address Sinophobia. While my interview data mainly featured Central Asians from urban areas, previous public opinion polls show that pro-Chinese attitudes are more common among Central Asians than we would expect. The Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 public opinion data on China (see Figure 6 on the next page), support my observations presented here. More than 55 percent of Central Asians who participated in the Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 in autumn 2022 described China to be very friendly or somewhat friendly toward their country. As such, both my narratives arising from focus groups and individual interviews with the urban Central Asian public somehow challenge previous scholars' assumption that Sinophobia continues to be wide-spread in Central Asia.

Finally, similar to Central Asia with almost one-third of the population still not having stable access to mobile internet in 2024, the demand for smartphones in the Global South is expected to rise, offering immense opportunities for Chinese telecommunications companies. As a point for future research, it would be important to address whether or not the

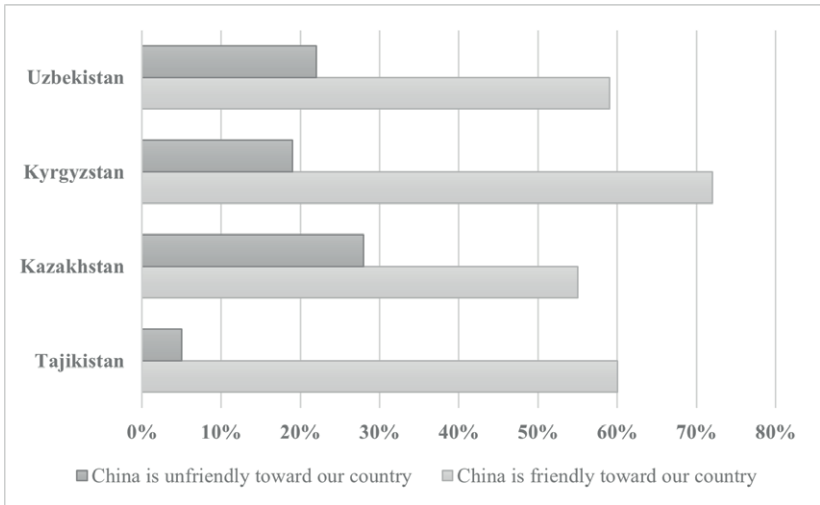


Figure 6. Central Asians' perception of China as a friendly or unfriendly country. Source: Central Asia Barometer Wave 12 (2022).

growing popularity of Chinese technologies in the populous Global South will result in the replacement of the US by China as the driver for technological change.

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