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## STUDY ON KAZAKHSTAN'S MEDIA IMAGE IN THE NARRATIVES OF CHINA'S MAINSTREAM MEDIA FROM THE CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE (2004–2024)

The research aims to trace the transformation of Kazakhstan's media image in China and to identify how different types of media contribute to shaping its regional role within South-South cooperation. National image constitutes a core element of a country's soft power. A favorable national image enhances national cohesion domestically while boosting international competitiveness externally. Concurrently, due to shifts in the international landscape, ideological confrontations, and cultural disparities, the construction of national images by external actors faces cognitive biases and communication challenges. As a crucial source of "other-oriented perspectives," media coverage plays a pivotal role in shaping national images.

The methodology of this research is to employing Critical Discourse Analysis and Framing Theory, this study systematically examines the evolution of narrative strategies in China's mainstream media, market-oriented media, and social media regarding Kazakhstan from 2004 to 2024. The analysis identifies distinct phased characteristics in China-Kazakhstan relations as constructed through media narratives, manifesting three distinct phases: the Energy Cooperation Period (2004–2013), the Strategic Upgrading Period (2013–2022), and the Multi-Dimensional Deepening Period (2022–2024). Throughout this progression, Kazakhstan's national image has undergone a concomitant transformation.

The results of this study show that Kazakhstan's national image has shifted from being framed primarily as an energy partner to a multidimensional strategic actor. Official media reinforced strategic legitimacy through "Belt and Road" label anchoring and policy coordination narratives, while social media activated public emotional resonance via low-context symbols, forming a "high-low context complementary" communication paradigm. Furthermore, the media image and actual national profile exhibit bidirectional co-construction – Chinese media not only reflect Kazakhstan's objective development but also proactively shape its regional role through strategic communication. This research provides theoretical insights into reconstructing South-South cooperation discourse through non-confrontational media narratives and offers empirical references for Kazakhstan to optimize its communication strategies toward China and engage in Global South discourse power competition.

**Keywords:** national image, media image, Sino-Kazakh relations, Belt and Road, cross-cultural communication, media narratives, strategic communication.

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## Қытайдаң негізгі ақпарат құралдарындағы Қазақстан имиджін кросс-мәдениеттік перспективада зерттеу (2004–2024)

Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстанның Қытайдағы БАҚ, имиджінің өзгеруін бақылап, Оңтүстік пен Оңтүстік екі мемлекет ынтымақтастығы аясындағы аймақтық рөлін қалыптастыруға әртүрлі бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының қалай ықпал ететінін анықтауға бағытталған. Кез келген мемлекеттің ұлттық имиджі "жұмсақ құштің" негізгі элементінің бірі. Ұлттық имидж мемлекеттің ішінде ұлттық бірлікті нығайтса, сыртқы саясатта халықаралық бәсекеге қабілеттілікті арттырады. Десек те, халықаралық кеңістіктері өзгерістер, идеологиялық қарама-қайшылықтар мен мәдени айырмашылықтарға байланысты, сыртқы жағдайда ұлттық имиджі құру процесі бүрмаланулар мен коммуникациялық қындықтарға тап болады. «Басқаша бейімделу тұрғысынан қараудың» маңызды көзі ретінде ақпарат құралдарындағы жарияланымдар ұлттық имиджі қалыптастыруда шешуші рөл атқарады.

Бұл зерттеудің әдістемесі сынни дискурсты талдау және фрейминг теориясын қолдану арқылы 2004 жылдан 2024 жылға дейін Қытайдың негізгі бұқаралық, ақпарат құралдарындағы, нарықта бағдарланған медиадағы және әлеуметтік медиадағы баяндау стратегияларының эволюциясын жүйелі түрде зерттеуге арналған. Яғни, сынни дискурс талдауы мен Фрейминг теориясын қолдана отырып, 2004-2024 жылдар аралығында Қытайдың негізгі ақпарат құралдарында, коммерциялық медиа мен әлеуметтік желілердегі Қазақстан туралы ақпарат тарату стратегияларының эволюциясын жүйелі түрде зерттейді. Талдау нәтижесінде ақпарат құралдары материалдары негізінде Қытай-Қазақстан қарым-қатынасының ерекше кезеңдік сипаттамалары анықталды және олар үш кезеңге бөліп қарастырылды: Энергетикалық ынтымақтастық, кезеңі (2004-2013), Стратегиялық жаңғыру кезеңі (2013-2022) және Қөпбағдарлы тереңдегу кезеңі (2022-2024).

Бұл зерттеудің нәтижелері Қазақстанның үлттық, имиджінің ең алдымен энергетикалық се-ріктес ретінде қалыптасудан көп өлшемді стратегиялық, әріптеске айналғанын көрсетеді. Бұл үдерісте Қазақстанның үлттық имиджі де жақсарды. Ресми ақпарат құралдары "Belt and Road" белгісі және саясатты үйлестіру ақпараттары арқылы стратегиялық, легитимділікті нығайтса, әлеуметтік желілер төмен контекстті символдар арқылы қоғамдық эмоционалды резонансты іске қосып, «жоғары-төмен контекстті толықтыру» коммуникациялық парадигмасын қалыптастырыды. Сонымен қатар, бұқаралық, ақпарат құралдарының имиджі мен нақты үлттық профиль екі жақты құрылымдауға ие. Атап айтқанда, Қытай ақпарат құралдары Қазақстанның объективті дамуын ғана көрсетіп қоймай, сонымен бірге стратегиялық, коммуникация арқылы оның аймақтық, рөлін белсенді түрде қалыптастырады. Бұл зерттеу өзара қайшылықтан тыс медиа наративтер арқылы Оңтүстік пен Оңтүстік ынтымақтастық дискурсын қайта құруға теориялық түсініктер береді және Қазақстан мен Қытайға бағытталған коммуникациялық стратегияларын оңтайландыруға әрі Global South дискурстық, билік бәсекесіне қатысуға эмпирикалық, анықтамалар ұсынады.

**Түйін сөздер:** үлттық имидж, медиа имидж, Қытай-Қазақ қарым-қатынасы, бір белдік, бір ендік, кросс-мәдени байланыс, медиа наратив, стратегиялық коммуникация.

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**Исследование медиаобраза Казахстана в наративах  
ведущих китайских СМИ с точки зрения кросс-культурного подхода  
(2004–2024)**

Целью исследования является отслеживание трансформации медиаобраза Казахстана в Китае и выявление того, как различные типы СМИ способствуют формированию его региональной роли в рамках сотрудничества Юг-Юг. Национальный имидж является ключевым элементом «мягкой силы» страны. Благоприятный национальный имидж укрепляет национальную сплоченность внутри страны и повышает международную конкурентоспособность на внешнем рынке. В то же время, в связи с изменениями в международной обстановке, идеологическими конфронтациями и культурными различиями, формирование национальных образов внешними факторами сталкивается с когнитивными искажениями и коммуникационными проблемами. Будучи важнейшим источником «других точек зрения», освещение событий в СМИ играет ключевую роль в формировании национальных образов.

Методология данного исследования заключается в использовании критического дискурсивного анализа и теории фрейминга. В данном исследовании систематически изучается эволюция наративных стратегий в основных средствах массовой информации Китая, рыночно-ориентированных СМИ и социальных сетях в отношении Казахстана с 2004 по 2024 год. Используя критический дискурс-анализ и теорию фрейминга, данное исследование систематически рассматривает эволюцию наративных стратегий в основных СМИ Китая, рыночно-ориентированных СМИ и социальных сетях относительно Казахстана с 2004 по 2024 год. Анализ выявляет отдельные фазовые характеристики в китайско-казахстанских отношениях, конструируемых посредством медийных наративов, проявляя три отдельных этапа: период энергетического сотрудничества (2004–2013), период стратегической модернизации (2013–2022) и период многомерного углубления (2022–2024).

Результаты данного исследования показывают, что национальный имидж Казахстана изменился: если раньше его воспринимали в первую очередь как энергетического партнера, то теперь он рассматривается как многомерный стратегический игрок. На протяжении этого времени национальный имидж Казахстана претерпевал заметную трансформацию. Официальные СМИ укрепляли стратегическую легитимность посредством закрепления ярлыка «Один пояс, один путь» и наративов координации политики, в то время как социальные сети активировали общественный эмоциональный резонанс посредством низкоконтекстных символов, формируя комму-

никационную парадигму «высоко-низкоконтекстного дополнения». Более того, медийный имидж и реальный национальный профиль демонстрируют двунаправленное взаимодействие: китайские СМИ не только отражают объективное развитие Казахстана, но и активно формируют его региональную роль посредством стратегических коммуникаций. Данное исследование представляет теоретические основы реконструкции дискурса сотрудничества «Юг–Юг» посредством неконфронтационных медиаnarративов и предлагает эмпирические рекомендации для Казахстана по оптимизации коммуникационных стратегий в отношении Китая и участию в глобальной конкуренции за власть в дискурсе «Юг».

**Ключевые слова:** национальный имидж; медиаимидж; Китайско-Казахстанские отношения; «Один пояс, один путь»; межкультурная коммуникация; медиаnarративы; стратегические коммуникации.

## Introduction

As a geopolitical pivot in Eurasia, the relationship between Kazakhstan and China has consistently served as a critical variable in international political and economic dynamics. “Since Kazakhstan’s independence in 1991, bilateral relations have undergone multiple strategic reconfigurations. This transformation is deeply rooted in the Soviet-era infrastructure and resource ties: during the Soviet period (1920s–1991), Kazakhstan was integrated into the USSR’s ‘center-periphery’ resource allocation system as a key energy supplier (the Central Asia-West Siberia oil pipeline network) and transportation hub (the Almaty-Urumqi railway prototype). The construction of Kazakhstan’s national image by Chinese media not only epitomizes the trajectory of bilateral interactions but also functions as a key window for understanding the evolution of Sino-Kazakh societal perceptions.”

The analysis traces China’s media portrayal of Kazakhstan, which has evolved from a “distant neighbor” to a core partner in the “community with a shared future”—a transformation paralleling the deepening bilateral relationship from early energy collaboration to comprehensive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) alignment and strategic coordination amid today’s geopolitical complexities. This discursive shift not only mirrors the advancing trajectory of Sino-Kazakh relations but also illustrates how media narratives reshape national identities within global politico-economic dynamics.

At the turn of the 21st century, China’s “Western Development Strategy” positioned energy cooperation as the cornerstone of bilateral engagement. The 2004 signing of the China-Kazakhstan Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation institutionalized this partnership, with mainstream Chinese media consistently framing Kazakhstan as a “critical pillar of China’s energy security” through discourses of “energy corridors” and “western energy

arteries.” The 2013 launch of the BRI fundamentally redefined cooperation dimensions and media narrative logics. Rooted in China’s national development framework, the 2015 “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” explicitly designated Central Asia as a “priority region” for connectivity, highlighting Kazakhstan’s role as a “key node” due to its geographical centrality. Subsequent policy documents, including the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), further emphasized: “Advance the Silk Road Economic Belt construction, strengthen strategic alignment with Central Asian nations, and foster a community with a shared future.”

Strategic alignment between the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and Kazakhstan’s “Bright Road” economic policy prompted Chinese media to systematically construct Kazakhstan’s identity as a “land power hub.” Post-2022 global geopolitical turbulence further deepened the strategic substance of bilateral ties.

The construction of Kazakhstan’s national image by Chinese media constitutes a trans-cultural practice intertwining “top-down” strategic communication with “bottom-up” grassroots discourse. Notably, the “fragmented communication” of the social media era is reshaping paradigms of national image-building. Traditional media’s “high-context” strategic narratives and short-video platforms’ “low-context” grassroots storytelling form a complementary duality: the former legitimizes strategies through authoritative discourse, while the latter mobilizes public engagement via everyday symbols. The interplay between “macro-micro” narrative layers imbues Kazakhstan’s media image with unprecedented depth and societal resonance.

Across two decades of media framing, the evolving Sino-Kazakh media imagery reflects a paradigmatic shift from “instrumental rationality” to “value identity.” Through such cross-cultural micro-narratives, Chinese media have not merely reconstructed

Kazakhstan's national image but also reshaped domestic perceptions of neighboring states—transcending the utilitarian “resource-oriented perspective” toward a “civilizational coexistence framework.” “For Kazakhstan, deciphering China’s media construction mechanisms is not only essential for optimizing diplomatic strategies toward China but also a critical pathway for participating in Global South discourse realignment. This study aims to provide a longitudinal analysis of Kazakhstan’s media image evolution in China, mapping its “objective profile” and “subjective imaginaries” within Chinese media contexts through horizontal and vertical examinations of key bilateral cooperation milestones.

## Literature review

### *Theoretical Framework of National Image*

National image is defined as the collective impression and evaluation formed by individuals (the perceivers) toward a nation (the perceived) based on its objective existence and external manifestations (Wu Xianju & Zhang Kun, 2016). Crucially, this concept is dynamic: Entman (1993) argues that media framing evolves with socio-political contexts, transforming ‘static stereotypes’ into ‘adaptive identities. In communication studies, mass media are recognized as pivotal in shaping and disseminating national images, with particular attention to how media constructions influence public perceptions (Wanta et al., 2004). This study operationalizes ‘national image’ across four dimensions: economic (resource tool → rule node), political (regional participant → stabilizer), cultural (nomadic other → civilizational crossroads), and security (peripheral actor → global public goods provider). Scholars propose that national image comprises three dimensions: the actual national profile, the mediated national image, and the cognitive national image. These dimensions interact dialectically: the actual profile forms the ontological foundation, the mediated image serves as the communicative channel, and the cognitive image emerges as the perceptual outcome (Wang Pengjin, 2009). National image-building thus involves dual efforts: improving tangible socio-political-economic conditions and strategically managing mediated representations, with the latter gaining urgency given media’s dominance in public cognition.

Since the 1980s, the concept of “national image” has increasingly diverged from its non-competitive essence, becoming instrumentalized within realist international politics as a tool for power struggles.

Image politics now operates under a logic where symbolic representations dominate state behaviors and global relations, transforming international power dynamics into a contest of ideational construction (Guo Yi & Song Xinyi, 2024).

### *Research Necessity and Innovation*

This study addresses three gaps in existing scholarship: First, while national image research predominantly focuses on developed nations or traditional geopolitical hotspots, longitudinal media analyses of Central Asian states like Kazakhstan remain sparse. Second, as a core hub of the Belt and Road Initiative, the dynamic shifts in Kazakhstan’s positioning within China’s external communication system provide empirical evidence for understanding how emerging economies build strategic trust. Third, the narrative framework surrounding Kazakhstan developed under China’s “community with a shared future for mankind” concept offers a unique analytical sample for testing non-Western perspectives on image politics theory.

This study’s innovation lies in its 20-year longitudinal discourse analysis. It reveals a bidirectional interactive shaping mechanism between media-constructed images and a nation’s actual image. Chinese media not only reflect Kazakhstan’s development trajectory through symbolic labels like “energy partner” and “multidimensional hub” but also actively shape regional role perceptions through strategic communication practices. This process breaks the one-way perspective of traditional “media reflection theory.” By analyzing the transformation of Kazakhstan’s image from a single energy symbol to a Pluralistic narrative system, this research contributes a non-Western analytical pathway to international political communication theory. It demonstrates how emerging economies can reshape South-South cooperation discourse through non-confrontational image strategies.

Kazakh scholar Nurgaliyev argued in *The Energy History of Central Asia* (2018) that the Soviet-era “center-periphery” resource allocation model left dual historical legacies for Kazakhstan. It established material foundations for energy infrastructure such as oil pipelines and refineries. Simultaneously, it solidified the stereotypical perception of Kazakhstan as a “resource supplier” in international media narratives. This study finds that while China’s media narratives about the “energy corridor” (2004–2013) were partially influenced by this historical legacy, they differed fundamentally from the Soviet model. They emphasized “mutual benefit and interdepen-

dence». This contrasts with the one-sided resource acquisition logic of the Soviet approach.

## Methodology

### Research Methodology and Scope

This study employs qualitative research methods anchored in critical discourse analysis (CDA) and framing theory to investigate the dynamic construction of Kazakhstan's national image in Chinese media from 2004 to 2024. Focusing on three pivotal milestones in Sino-Kazakh relations—the Energy Cooperation Phase (the 2006 completion of the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline), the Strategic Upgrade Phase (the 2017 Astana Expo and geopolitical crises), and the Geopolitical Turbulence Phase (the 2022 political instability), the research analyzes differentiated narrative strategies across diverse media formats:

Mainstream media: People's Daily  
Short-video platforms: Douyin (TikTok)/Bilibili  
Television media: CCTV-4

Print media: Global Times

The study systematically deconstructs:

“Strategic discourse encoding” in state media: e.g., framing Kazakhstan as a “BRI model country” through policy-aligned narratives.

“Cultural decoding mechanisms” in short-video platforms: e.g., tourism vlogs dismantling stereotypes via grassroots cultural interactions.

“Framing contests” during crises: e.g., Competing narratives between “counterterrorism narratives” and “livelihood demands” in political upheaval reporting.

By triangulating these dimensions, the research reveals how Kazakhstan's media image evolves through the interplay of institutional agendas, technological affordances, and sociopolitical contexts.

**Table 1** – Phase Division and Key Milestones

Stage	Time Range	Key Events	Media Focus and Image Transformation	Soviet-Era Legacy
<i>Energy Cooperation Stage</i>	2004 – 2013	<i>In 2006, the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline was completed; in 2009, the natural gas pipeline agreement was signed; in 2011, the «Western Energy Corridor» strategic plan was proposed.</i>	<i>The functional positioning of “Kazakhstan as an energy passage», emphasizing resource complementarity and infrastructure cooperation.</i>	<i>2006 pipeline utilized 60% of Soviet-era Atasu-Alashankou pipeline infrastructure; 2009 gas agreement built on Soviet gas field development.</i>
<i>Strategic Upgrade Stage</i>	2013 – 2022	<i>In 2013, the «Belt and Road» Initiative was launched; in 2017, the Astana Expo was held; in 2019, the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Kazakhstan was established.</i>	<i>Kazakhstan's transformation into a «land bridge hub», highlighting digital economic cooperation and regional governance participation.</i>	
<i>Multi-dimensional Deepening Stage</i>	2022 – 2024	<i>In 2022, the Kazakh government was shaken; in 2023, the China – Central Asia Summit was held; in 2024, the 32nd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Kazakhstan.</i>	<i>Kazakhstan as a «regional stabilizer» and the composite image of the «confluence of Eurasian civilizations», strengthening security coordination and cultural identity narrative.</i>	

**Table 2** – Media Samples and Data Types

Media Type	Sample Selection	Analysis Focus
<i>Official Mainstream Media (China)</i>	<i>«People's Daily», front page of «Guangming Daily» and international edition reports; CCTV-4 «China News» special topics</i>	<i>Semantic construction of policy discourse's «strategic coding» (e.g., «Belt and Road hub»)</i>
<i>Official Mainstream Media (Kazakhstan)</i>	<i>«Kazakhstanskaya Pravda» (Kazakhstan's state newspaper), Khabar TV news programs</i>	<i>Narrative framing of Sino-Kazakh cooperation (e.g., «multi-vector diplomacy» and «strategic autonomy»)</i>

Continuation of the table

Media Type	Sample Selection	Analysis Focus
Market-oriented Newspapers	«Global Times» and «Economic Observer» in-depth reports and reviews	<i>Risk-opportunity balance under economic cooperation</i>
Social Media Platforms (Kazakhstan)	<i>VKontakte (VK) discussions under #Қазақстан-Қытай_достығы# (#Kazakhstan-China Friendship#); Instagram posts by Kazakhstani influencers</i>	<i>Grassroots feedback on Chinese media's portrayal of Kazakhstan (e.g., «nomadic stereotype» debates)</i>

**Table 3** – Analysis Framework Design

Dimension	Subcategory	Research Focus
Thematic Framework	Economy, Politics, Culture	<i>Narrative power changes in topics such as energy cooperation, regional security, and cultural dialogue</i>
Narrative Strategy	Symbolic Label Emotional Mobilization Identity Reconstruction	<i>Semantic upgrade from «energy partner» to «multidimensional pivot»; the «stability maintenance framework» and the «livelihood appeal» game in crisis events</i>
Discourse Power	Ideological Coding, Cross-cultural Negotiation	<i>The contrast between the narrative of official media «community with a shared future for mankind» and the «pragmatism» tendency of social media; the translation logic of Kazakhstan's domestic policies in Chinese media</i>

### ***Textual Analysis of Kazakhstan's Media Image Energy Cooperation Phase (2004–2013): Functional Narratives and Stereotype Reinforcement***

#### 1. Economic Dimension: Utilitarian Construction of the ‘Energy Corridor’

Official Media Narratives: Represented by People's Daily, state-aligned discourse reduced Kazakhstan to a resource supplier through labels like ‘energy artery’ and ‘western energy lifeline.’ A content analysis of People's Daily (2004–2013) reveals that ‘energy’ (38%), ‘pipeline’ (22%), and ‘resource’ (19%) were the top three keywords, accounting for 79% of all Kazakhstan-related coverage. This ‘resource-centric’ framing solidified a utilitarian image—CNKI data shows that 72% of Chinese netizens in 2010 described Kazakhstan as ‘China's energy supplier’ in surveys (China Academy of Social Sciences, 2011).

This framing echoes the Soviet-era ‘resource extraction’ model—during the USSR, Kazakhstan's oil and gas were primarily transported northward to Russian refineries, reinforcing its identity as a ‘peripheral resource zone.’ For instance, the 2006 China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline, which partially utilized the Soviet-era pipeline infrastructure (the Atasu-Alashankou section), was framed by People's Daily as ‘revitalizing the ancient Silk Road with modern energy,’ implicitly linking contemporary cooperation to historical continuity while reorienting the

resource flow from ‘northward’ to ‘eastward’. For instance, coverage of the 2006 China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline inauguration heavily employed terms such as “strategic assurance” and “mutual benefit,” reinforcing the instrumental rationality of energy cooperation.

While this narrative emphasized Kazakhstan's critical role in China's energy security, it largely overlooked the nation's sociopolitical complexity and multidimensional identity. Official media tend to focus on promoting economic gains and bilateral strategic trust. They pay limited attention to Kazakhstan's domestic transformations and public sentiments. This one-sided reporting has entrenched the stereotypical perception of Kazakhstan as merely a resource exporter. It overlooks the country's broader regional potential.

**Dialectical Perspective of Market-Oriented Media:** During the 2009 natural gas agreement signing, Global Times adopted a more nuanced stance. While acknowledging cooperation achievements, the newspaper used metaphors in its editorials to caution against “resource dependency risks”. For instance, it stated: “Sino-Kazakh energy cooperation must guard against single-path dependency”

Compared to the one-sided narrative of state media, this dialectical perspective enables a multidimensional understanding of international relations. Global Times balances economic benefits with cri-

tiques of systemic vulnerabilities. This exemplifies market-driven media's tendency toward critical scrutiny. Such reporting not only mitigates polar-

ized public perceptions but also reflects increasing media reflexivity about transnational interdependences.

**Table 4** – Media Portrayals and Public Discourse: A Micro-level Study on Kazakhstan's Economic Image in Chinese Media Analysis

Dimension	Media Content Examples	Public Discussion Highlights
<i>National Strategy</i>	<i>2006 People's Daily referred to the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline as the "Western Energy Artery," emphasizing its strategic significance for China's energy security.</i>	<i>On Tianya Forum's «Central Asia» section (2010), a netizen commented: «Kazakhstan feels like China's gas station» (not representative of all comments; controversial)</i>
<i>Economic Sectors</i>	<i>1. Logistics: Reports noted increased freight volume on the China-Kazakhstan Railway but did not specify cargo types; 2. Specialties: Coverage included rare earths, wool, and petroleum products</i>	<i>A 2011 Zhihu Q&amp;A on «Kazakhstan's specialties» had a top comment: «Is there anything besides oil?»</i>
<i>Civilian Interactions</i>	<i>Official media rarely covered grassroots exchanges, focusing mostly on macro policy interpretation.</i>	<i>2010 Taobao search for «Kazakhstan» showed top results dominated by oil equipment.</i>

## 2. Cultural Dimension: The “Pastoral Steppe” in Social Media Imagination

Early social media content often centered on curiosity-driven depictions of Kazakhstan. For example, Bilibili's Kazakhstan Nomadic Diary series focused on cultural symbols like yurts and equestrian festivals, labeling the country as a “pastoral nation” through terms such as “exotic charm” or “primitive simplicity.” This narrow focus inadvertently reinforced stereotypes, reducing Kazakhstan's cultural complexity to a set of traditional icons.

However, as grassroots exchanges between China and Kazakhstan deepened, these narratives began to shift. Take Douyin blogger “Silk Road Wanderer,” who released the Astana City Walks video series in 2023. By contrasting Astana's modern architecture with nearby steppe villages, the videos not only showcased cultural uniqueness but also highlighted how urbanization fosters multicultural fusion. This approach moved beyond one-dimensional tropes, inviting audiences to view Kazakhstan not as a static “pastoral other” but as a dynamic space where tradition and modernity coexist.

Notably, these content shifts mirror deeper changes in cross-cultural perception. Early videos treated Kazakhstan as an object of curiosity, emphasizing its “exotic” elements. In contrast, newer content like Astana City Walks positions viewers as participants in a shared narrative—one that acknowledges both historical roots and contemporary evolution. This transition from “spectator curiosity” to “immersive understanding” suggests social me-

dia's potential to reshape cultural imagery from the ground up. Through parallel “tradition-modernity” narratives, such content dismantled one-dimensional cultural symbolism, transforming audiences from “curious spectators” into “immersive experiences.”

Significantly, Kazakh creators have started using Chinese platforms for self-representation. Bilibili UP主 “Voices of Kazakh Youth” shares bilingual vlogs documenting Almaty's art exhibitions and youth entrepreneurship, reconstructing national identity through a “cultural subjectivity” lens. Yet, Kazakhstani public feedback on local social media reveals nuanced reception: According to VK analytics (2024), the hashtag #Қазақстан-Қытай достығы# (#Kazakhstan-China Friendship#) has 1.2 million posts, with 38% of comments expressing mixed views—22% praise “grassroots friendship,” while 16% critique “stereotypical portrayals,” asking, “Why no coverage of our tech startups?”

This bidirectional cultural decoding mechanism not only counteracts earlier “othering” narratives but also integrates Kazakhstan's “steppe ethos” with “innovative vitality” through grassroots content creation, offering audiences a multilayered cognitive framework.

Limitations persist in official cultural reporting. For instance, CCTV-4's Homes Afar program, while incorporating Kazakh folk customs, maintained superficial narratives. Its 2015-episode Kazakhstan: Horseback Nation on the Steppe focused on traditional scenes like eagle training and yurt-making, reinforcing static “nomadic culture” symbols. It

ignored modernization topics such as Almaty's financial hub or Nur-Sultan's smart city development. Such one-sided portrayals risked cementing a "traditional vs. modern" binary, obscuring Kazakhstan's identity as a Eurasian civilizational crossroads.

Recent years, however, have brought gradual improvements. The 2023 *Homes Afar* series *New Faces of the Silk Road* highlighted Kazakhstan's tech innovation zones and cross-cultural industries. One segment featured Astana's IT startup "Tech-

Nomad," showcasing how young entrepreneurs transform nomadic heritage into digital tourism IP. Another explored Sino-Kazakh joint archaeology projects, revealing synergies between ancient Silk Road preservation and modern urban planning. These narrative changes not only added depth to Kazakhstan's cultural image but also aligned with Kazakh academic discussions on "cultural heritage revitalization," emphasizing "tradition empowering modernity."

**Table 5** – Media Portrayals and Public Discourse: A Micro-level Study on Kazakhstan's Economic Image in Chinese Media Analysis

Subdivision Field	Media Content Example	Folk Cognitive Representation (China)	Folk Cognitive Representation (Kazakhstan)
<i>National Cognition</i>	<i>CCTV</i> « <i>Home Away from Home</i> »: « <i>The hospitable nomadic people</i> »	<i>Netizen impression</i> : « <i>Kazakhs can only herd</i> »	<i>VK comment</i> : « <i>Chinese media always shows yurts and horses—do they think we don't have skyscrapers?</i> » (2020 post with 800 shares)
<i>Cultural Industry</i>	<i>No cultural industry report</i>	<i>Douban book review</i> : « <i>Does Kazakhstan have no literature?</i> »	
<i>Food Culture</i>	<i>Microblog</i> mentions « <i>mare's milk</i> » but not in depth	<i>Zhihu Q&amp;A</i> : « <i>Does Kazakh cuisine = mutton + milk?</i> »	

### Strategic Upgrade Phase (2013–2022): Hub Narratives and Agency Reconfiguration

#### 1. Political Realm: Policy Synergy and the Construction of a "Land Power Hub" Identity

The 2017 Astana Expo emerged as a pivotal moment for framing Sino-Kazakh strategic alignment. China's *Guangming Daily* ran a special feature titled "Pearl of the Silk Road," which explicitly tied the Expo's architectural symbolism to bilateral cooperation—marking Kazakhstan's shift from a mere "corridor" to a "hub" in media discourse. A content analysis of 500 *Guangming Daily* articles published between 2013 and 2022 reveals a telling linguistic shift: references to "hub"-related terms («land power hub,» "logistics nod e") surged by 45%, while "energy"-centric vocabulary dropped to 21% of coverage. This lexical transition mirrored evolving public perceptions: a 2020 survey by the China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) found that 58% of Chinese respondents now associated Kazakhstan with the label "Belt and Road key node," a stark rise from just 12% in 2013.

Kazakh media, offered a distinct narrative framing. The state-run *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* positioned the Expo as a platform for "multi-vector diplomacy," emphasizing Astana's simultaneous engagement with China, the EU, and Turkey. For

instance, its 2017 article "Astana Expo: Balancing East and West" highlighted Kazakhstan's role as a "Eurasian bridge" rather than a "China-centric hub," reflecting a deliberate strategy to assert strategic autonomy amid global partnerships. This divergence in media narratives underscores how Kazakhstan's "hub" identity was co-constructed through both bilateral alignment and multilateral positioning. For example, its 2017 article 'Astana Expo: Balancing East and West' emphasized Kazakhstan's role as a 'Eurasian bridge' rather than a 'China-centric hub,' reflecting Astana's strategic priority of maintaining global partnerships beyond the BRI. For instance, by analyzing the Expo's "Future Energy" exhibition zone, reports juxtaposed Kazakhstan's energy transition vision with BRI's green cooperation framework, highlighting its nodal role in Eurasia's clean energy network. Such narratives not only solidified Kazakhstan's strategic positioning as a "land power hub" but also expanded bilateral cooperation from infrastructure projects to multilateral coordination in technology and environmental governance through "policy-program" linkage logic.

Chinese media's construction of Kazakhstan's "hub" identity deeply resonated with domestic policy agendas. A keyword comparison between China's 'Belt and Road' vision document (2015) and

Kazakhstan's 'Bright Road' policy (2014) reveals strategic alignment: 'connectivity' (BRI: 18 mentions; Bright Road: 12) and 'infrastructure' (BRI: 23; Bright Road: 15) are top shared terms, while 'diversification' (Bright Road: 9) and 'multilateralism' (BRI: 7) reflect unique priorities. When reporting on the 2019 establishment of the China-Kazakhstan comprehensive strategic partnership, People's Daily employed the "dual-engine drive" metaphor to analyze the complementarity between Kazakhstan's "Bright Road" New Economic Policy and the BRI, emphasizing institutional alignment in cross-border logistics and digital port development. This narrative directly echoes China's national strategic priorities: the State Council's 'Guiding Opinions on Promoting High-Quality Development of the Belt and Road' (2020) explicitly requires media to 'strengthen the discursive support for key nodes in the BRI,' with Kazakhstan listed as a 'model country for regional cooperation.' This "issue-binding" strategy simultaneously provided discursive support for Kazakhstan's regional governance participation and facilitated its transformation from regional

participant to rule coordinator through the "Central Asia-China-Europe" connectivity narrative.

**Framing Contests in Crisis Events:** During the 2022 political turbulence, People's Daily adopted an "anti-terrorism stabilization" framework with headlines like *Stabilizing Kazakhstan's Situation Highlights SCO's Role*, while the Weibo hashtag *#What's Happening in Kazakhstan* revealed grassroots concerns over "livelihood demands," creating discursive tensions. State media (CCTV-4) framed the crisis through the "SCO security cooperation" lens, accentuating Kazakhstan's agency in regional security mechanisms. Conversely, social media platforms saw widespread public discussions on inflation control and employment challenges. This coexistence of official and grassroots discourses not only reflected Chinese audiences' deepening understanding of Kazakhstan's societal complexity but also indirectly prompted Kazakhstan's subsequent policy adjustments toward balancing "social stability" with "economic development," further consolidating its international image as a "Eurasian stabilizer."

**Table 6 – Political Dimension: Micro-level Manifestations of Kazakhstan's National Image in Chinese Media**

Dimension	Media Coverage and Real Cases	Public Discussions and Reactions
Policy Coordination	<i>Guangming Daily</i> once called Kazakhstan a «Belt and Road Model Country». During the 2017 Astana Expo, its report on the China-Kazakhstan Industrial Park highlighted how the park «incubates policies» for regional cooperation.	<i>On Weibo, the topic #Exploring China-Kazakhstan Industrial Park# had netizens asking, «What procedures are needed to open a factory in Kazakhstan?» Zhihu also had discussions like «Is Kazakhstan's tax policy friendly to Chinese enterprises?»</i>
Crisis Reporting	<i>When political unrest occurred in Kazakhstan in 2022, Global Times quoted a think tank saying «the SCO played an important role in stabilizing the situation. Its reports mainly focused on «anti-terrorism and stability maintenance».</i>	<i>Weibo users talked about #What's wrong with Kazakhstan#. Some were worried about «rising prices», while others said «it might be a color revolution». On Douyin, some people posted videos of Almaty's streets returning to normal, with captions like «The government will definitely control it».</i>
People-to-People Exchanges	<i>CCTV reported that Chinese and Kazakh young volunteers did environmental protection activities together, calling this a «people-to-people bond».</i>	<i>Bilibili video called «Volunteering in Kazakhstan» got over 500,000 views. Viewers left comments like «This is real friendship between people». WeChat article «How do young Kazakhs see China?» was read more than 100,000 times.</i>

## 2. Economic Dimension: The Metaphorical Expansion of Logistics Networks

In 2021, Chinese media outlets such as the Global Times framed Kazakhstan as "Central Asia's Digital Testing Ground," with coverage centered on the country's adoption of Chinese 5G technologies. This narrative, however, triggered critical debate within Kazakhstan's tech sector. The Kazakh technology

blog TechKaz challenged it in a widely shared post titled "Are We Merely a Testing Ground?" The article argued, "While Chinese tech has upgraded our digital infrastructure, local startups like Kaspi.kz are pioneering homegrown innovations rather than just copying Chinese models." This piece received 12,000 likes on VK. Such public feedback shows growing concerns among Kazakh netizens about

potential “technological dependency,” stressing the need for media narratives that acknowledge local initiative in tech development.

Meanwhile, the China-Europe Railway Express became a key symbol for communicating Kazakhstan’s role in regional logistics. In 2018, The Economic Observer created the term “Iron Camel Caravans” for these freight trains, presenting Kazakhstan as a “modern logistics hub.” This framing focused on “digitization” and “streamlined customs clearance,” reshaping views of Kazakhstan from a traditional transit country to a dynamic node in Eurasian supply chains. For example, its coverage of the Yuxinou Railway highlighted smart upgrades at Kazakhstan’s Dostyk Dry Port—such as automated container recognition and 24/7 cross-border data platforms. This transformed the traditional “slow land transport” image into a symbol of “efficient connectivity.” These narratives not only emphasized Kazakhstan’s key role in Eurasian logistics but also positioned it as a core node of the “Digital Silk Road” through the “Iron Camel Caravans” metaphor, mixing historical references with technological modernity.

Social media further spread this symbolic narrative. The 2020 Bilibili documentary 24 Hours on the China-Europe Railway, produced by UP “Silk Road Freight Agent,” showed Kazakhstan’s logistics professionals and Chinese goods flow through real-time tracking from Alashankou to Nur-Sultan. Bullet comments like “Kazakhstan’s customs clearance is so efficient!” and “This is true land power revival!” reflected public acceptance of Kazakhstan’s “modern logistics hub” identity. This resonance between

media narratives and grassroots cognition successfully translated national strategies into tangible public consensus.

**Narrative Shift in Digital Economy Cooperation:** Think tank reports, such as the Development Research Center of the State Council’s Central Asia Investment White Paper, positioned Kazakhstan as “Central Asia’s Digital Testing Ground,” prompting media focus on “smart cities” and “cross-border e-commerce.” A 2021 Global Times feature, Kazakhstan: From Camels to Cloud Computing, analyzed how Kazakhstan’s Shymkent Digital Free Trade Zone leveraged Chinese 5G technology and e-payment systems to build a “Central Asia-China-Europe digital trade corridor.” Neologisms like “digital caravans” and “cloud hubs” extended logistics metaphors while upgrading Kazakhstan’s economic role from a “physical corridor” to a “data relay station.”

Kazakh stakeholders actively co-constructed this image. During the Astana Economic Forum, Kazakhstan’s white paper Digital Silk Road: Opportunities and Challenges was republished by People’s Daily as exemplary “Sino-Kazakh digital vision alignment.” Concurrently, Douyin’s hashtag #KazakhstanECommerceTalents featured Almaty entrepreneurs live streaming collaborations between Kaspi.kz and Alibaba, using “technological localization” narratives to dismantle stereotypes of “unidirectional tech transfer” and highlight Kazakhstan’s indigenous innovation capacity.

This phase’s media practices validate the “techno-geopolitical” theoretical framework, demonstrating how infrastructure-digital synergy narratives can reconfigure regional economies’ strategic value.

**Table 7 – Economic Dimensions: Micro-level Expressions of Kazakhstan’s National Image**

Analytical Level	Media Coverage and Empirical Cases	Public Discourse Characteristics
National Strategic Narratives	<i>Guangming Daily characterized the China-Europe Railway Express as a catalyst for reshaping Kazakhstan’s role as a «land power hub,» highlighting its impact on Eurasian logistics networks.</i>	<i>Douyin’s trending topic #China-EuropeRailwayExpressDeliversGoods# generated over 100 million views, with users sharing real-time updates on cross-border cargo movements.</i>
Economic Activity Portrayals	<i>Logistics: Bilibili content creator «Silk Road Freight Agent» created a documentary entitled Daily Necessities on the Train, documenting the transit of Chinese consumer goods through Kazakhstan.</i> <i>Cultural Exchanges: Media coverage highlighted the release of the Kazakh film The Poet in China.</i> <i>Trade: E-commerce platform Pinduoduo introduced a «Kazakhstan Nuts Special Zone,» offering direct shipping of local agricultural products.</i>	<i>Xiaohongshu users discussed price comparisons: «Kazakh nuts are more affordable than American imports!» with comment threads debating quality and shipping times.</i>
Grassroots Commercial Interactions	<i>Weibo topic #China-KazakhstanE-commerceCooperation# triggered discussions on cross-border e-commerce policies</i>	<i>Consumer reviews reflected growing accessibility: «Finally able to purchase authentic Kazakh honey through official channels.»</i>

### 3. Cultural Dimension: Emergence of Modernity Narratives

Visual discourse innovation has driven the reconstruction of Kazakhstan's urban image. The Douyin series 24 Hours in Astana countered stereotypes of steppe underdevelopment by showcasing aerial footage of the capital's skyline, with captions such as "Central Asia's Dubai." By juxtaposing landmarks like the glass-domed Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center against the classical Astana Opera House, the series articulated "traditionally symbolic elements integrated with technology," embodying cultural confidence in harmonizing nomadic heritage with futuristic urban development. This sparked widespread engagement, with the hashtag #CentralAsiaNewLandmarks garnering over 200 million views; user comments like "Never realized Central Asian cities could achieve such modernity" indicated a shift from externally

imposed stereotypes to self-directed cultural expression.

Educational exchange has emerged as another domain for symbolic identity construction. The Weibo hashtag #SinoKazakhStudySeason featured student vlogs documenting academic life, transforming perceptions from "cultural other" to "educational collaborator" by emphasizing shared interests in technology and cultural studies—thus translating "modernity" into tangible collaborative practice.

These developments substantiate the "cultural proximity theory": Sino-Kazakh media have jointly constructed "modernity" as a transnational lingua franca through technology, education, and creative industries. This egalitarian model has not only redefined Kazakhstan's global image but also infused cultural dynamism into the China-Central Asia Community of Shared Future, demonstrating narrative synergies that transcend geopolitical boundaries.

**Table 8** – The Micro-level Manifestation of Kazakhstan's National Image from a Cultural Dimension

Subdivision Field	Media Content Example	Folk Cognitive Expression
Public Figures	<i>CCTV report</i> : Singer Dimash participated in the «Singer» program	<i>Weibo hot search</i> : «Dimash saves the image of Kazakhstan»
Entertainment Industry	<i>Youku</i> introduced the Kazakh variety show «Star Road»	<i>Bullet comments</i> : «The Kazakh variety show is so trendy»
Food Culture	<i>Douyin</i> blogger visited the «Beijing Kazakh Restaurant»	<i>Dazhong Dianping</i> : «The Kazakh food is different from the Xinjiang taste!»

### Multidimensional Deepening Phase (2022–2024): Composite Identity and Identity Construction

#### 1. Security Dimension: Strategic Narratives of the "Regional Stabilizer"

Media Framing during the Ukraine Crisis: CCTV-4's Today's Focus program framed Kazakhstan as a "crisis buffer zone" through labels like "Eurasian breadbasket," during the Ukraine crisis. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, however, emphasized its role as a 'neutral mediator' in a 2023 statement: 'Kazakhstan's grain exports aim to stabilize global markets, not to take sides.' titled "Kazakhstan: A Global Stabilizer, Not a Regional Proxy," which recast the "buffer zone" label as that of a "provider of global public goods." With headlines such as "Kazakhstan: A Stabilizing Force in Turbulent Times," the reports employed data-supported narratives—for instance, highlighting that Kazakhstan accounted for 5.2% of global wheat exports in 2023—to link its agricultural re-

sources to geopolitical initiatives like the "Central Asia–Black Sea Grain Corridor." This transformed Kazakhstan's agricultural capacity into a form of regional public goods, reinforcing its strategic value as the "Eurasian breadbasket." Such coverage not only aligned with international concerns over food security but also legitimized Kazakhstan's efforts to mitigate geopolitical risks and enhance its global discourse power through the media-framed identity of a "stable supplier."

Cross-Textual Diffusion of Counterterrorism Discourse: The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) report New Security Dynamics in Central Asia was reinterpreted by the Global Times through the lens of the "China-Kazakhstan Security Community" concept, amplifying a logic of "shared destiny" identity. This narrative strategy elevated bilateral cooperation from technical collaboration to value-based alignment via the symbolic framing of a "security community," tactfully avoiding sensitive terminology like "military alliance" while infusing

regional security governance with a “non-confrontational” normative consensus.

By deploying the dual frameworks of “Eurasian breadbasket” and “security community,” Chinese media have positioned Kazakhstan as a “regional stabilizer.” This stands in contrast to Chinese media’s portrayal of Kyrgyzstan, typically framed

as a “security partner.” This constructed identity aligns with Kazakhstan’s reality as a landlocked state navigating multipolar interests, while driving global recognition of Central Asia’s functional role in international governance through issue-linkage strategies such as “food security–counterterrorism synergy.”

**Table 9** – Security Dimensions of Kazakhstan’s National Image

Level	Micro Perspective and Case	Folk Discourse Expression
Regional Stability	<i>Media Label: «Eurasian Security Pivot» Case: CCTV-4 reported that Kazakhstan’s grain exports to Europe eased the impact of the Ukraine crisis</i>	<i>Netizen discussion: «Can Kazakh wheat replace Ukraine’s?» Agricultural blogger analysis: «Kazakh grain transportation cost»</i>
Anti-Terrorism Cooperation	<i>Media Label: «Security Community» Case: Xinhua News Agency reported on the tactical cooperation and equipment sharing in the China-Kazakhstan joint anti-terrorism exercise</i>	<i>Military enthusiast analysis of exercise equipment Ordinary user comment: «The joint police operation makes people feel at ease»</i>
Public Safety Perception	<i>Media Label: «Tourism Safety Index» Case: «Global Times» cited a think tank report evaluating the social stability of Kazakhstan</i>	<i>Discussions on Xiaohongshu centered around the topic «Is Almaty safe for travel?» The comment section saw lively exchanges, with users noting, «Public security is better than expected.» Meanwhile, Tieba discussions raised questions like «Is it safe to travel alone at night?»</i>

## 2. Economy and Culture: Identity at Civilization Crossroads

Cultural Heritage in New Contexts: The Bilibili documentary Silk Road Kazakhstan features 8th-century Turkic stone statues alongside BRI cultural preservation projects, creating a dialogue between ancient and modern. By contrasting medieval Turkic stone carvings with contemporary Sino-Kazakh joint archaeological efforts—such as digital restoration projects at the Talas River Basin sites—the film highlights Kazakhstan’s pivotal role in Silk Road civilizational continuity through the lens of “technological inheritance.”

Emotional Mobilization in Grassroots Exchanges: Under the Douyin hashtag #China Kazakhstan Friendship, users share short video of Sino-Kazakh

railway workers collaborating and civilians exchanging gifts, activating emotional resonance through visual symbols like “smiles” and “handshakes.” In contrast, Kazakhstani social media (e.g., VK) emphasizes ‘shared history’ in similar interactions: a 2024 VK post titled ‘Our Grandparents’ Silk Road’ features family photos of Kazakh-Chinese traders from the 1950s, framing friendship as a ‘generational legacy.’ These “depolitized” daily-life narratives dissolve intercultural barriers while forging collective memories of “amicable neighboring relations.” Such practices exemplify the “emotional community theory” in cultural studies, demonstrating how transnational solidarity emerges through cumulative affective symbolism.

**Table 10** – Nuanced Representation of Kazakhstan’s National Image in the Economic Dimension

Level	Media Content Examples	Folk Discourse Characteristics
National Strategy	«People’s Daily»: «The Golden Key to the Central Asian Market»	Zhihu post: «How to enter the Central Asian market through Kazakhstan?»
Economic Situation	<i>Logistics: Kuaishou live broadcast «Kazakhstan cold chain logistics inspection» Entertainment: TikTok promotion of Kazakhstan skiing tourism Apparel: Taobao «Kazakh ethnic costumes» sales surge Weibo topic</i>	Xiaohongshu strategy: «Skiing in Almaty is cheaper than in Hokkaido»
Folk Interaction	#China-Kazakhstan Tourism Year# Discussion on visa-free policy	User photo sharing: «Wearing a Kazakh robe and checking in at Astana»

**Table 11** – Cultural-Dimensional Nuanced Representation of Kazakhstan's National Image

Subdivision Field	Media Content Example	Folk Cognitive Performance
<i>National Cognition</i>	<i>Bilibili documentary «Kazakhstan Z Generation» showing young people's lives</i>	<i>Bullet screen: «They are no different from China's post-00s»</i>
<i>Cultural Industry</i>	<i>WeChat tweet introducing Kazakhstan independent bookstore «Silk Road Bookstore»</i>	<i>Douban group: «Seeking to purchase Kazakhstan novels»</i>
<i>Diet Culture</i>	<i>Douyin challenge #Copying Kazakh rice grabbing#</i>	<i>User comment: «Tried three times and finally succeeded!»</i>

### 3. Political-Economic Composite Narratives: Symbolic Elevation of the Central Asian Gateway

Discursive Empowerment through Summit Mechanisms: During the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit coverage, “Central Asian Gateway” emerged as a core label. This label is directly derived from China’s ‘14th Five-Year Plan for Foreign Trade Development’ (2021), which identifies Kazakhstan as a ‘priority hub for expanding Central Asian market access. People’s Daily editorialized Kazakhstan as the “golden key to unlocking Central Asian markets,” merging geopolitical and economic cooperation narratives. A special feature titled The “Bidirectional Decoding” of the Central Asian Gateway analyzed the transformation of the Khorgos International Center for Border Cooperation from a traditional goods distribution hub into a “digital free trade node,” emphasizing how Kazakhstan converted geopolitical advantages into rule-making authority through tariff simplification and blockchain adoption. Such reporting elevated the “Central Asian Gate-

way” from a geographic concept to an institution-alized discursive symbol via “policy innovation-market access” linkages, facilitating Chinese enterprises’ regional expansion while providing media endorsement for Kazakhstan’s third-party investment attraction.

Guangming Daily’s reporting on Kazakhstan’s “multi-vector diplomacy” acknowledges both the country’s “strategic autonomy” and implicitly supports China-led regional order-building. As highlighted in its 2023 international edition article The Art of Balancing the “Middle Corridor”, Kazakhstan concurrently advances the China-Europe Railway Express and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), deepening Sino-Kazakh cooperation while maintaining economic ties with the EU and Turkey. This integration of macro and micro narratives strengthens Kazakhstan’s media image as a regional hub and offers multifaceted rhetorical support to counter the “resource dependency” stereotype in global discourse, thereby embodying a balanced diplomatic narrative.

**Table 12** – Political and Economic Dimensions of Kazakhstan's National Image

Level	Micro Perspective and Case	Folk Discourse Expression
<i>Free Trade Zone Policy</i>	<i>Media Label: «The Golden Key to the Central Asian Market» Case: Economic Observer analyzes the tax preferential policies of the Kazakhstan Free Trade Zone</i>	<i>Zhihu Column: «A Guide to Avoiding Pitfalls for Cross-border E-commerce in Kazakhstan» Weibo Topic #Kazakhstan Free Trade Zone#: Netizens discuss «How to register a company?»</i>
<i>Entry into the Central Asian Market</i>	<i>Media Label: «The New Hub of the Belt and Road Initiative» Case: Douyin live broadcast «Kazakhstan Central Asian Commodity Exhibition Fair»</i>	<i>Kuaishou Live: Merchants display Kazakhstan leather products, barrage screen «How to place an order?» Xiaohongshu Note: «The Process of Entering the Markets of the Five Central Asian Countries through Kazakhstan»</i>
<i>Digital Economic Cooperation</i>	<i>Media Label: «The Digital Test Field in Central Asia» Case: People’s Daily reports on the China-Kazakhstan joint construction of the «Smart Almaty» project</i>	<i>Bilibili Video The 5G Construction in Kazakhstan: Tech bloggers analyze the base station coverage rate, comments discuss «Huawei’s Contribution» WeChat Article: «User Experience Survey of the E-commerce Platform in Kazakhstan» with over 100,000 views</i>

## Results and discussion

The construction of Kazakhstan's national image in Chinese media has unfolded across three developmental phases, gradually shifting from a resource-oriented cooperative positioning to an emphasis on

strategic hub functionality, and ultimately forming a multifaceted identity that embodies both a symbol of civilizational integration and a regional stabilization role. This progression deeply reflects the evolution of Sino-Kazakh relations from a pragmatically cooperative orientation toward value consensus.

**Table 13** – Summary of the Evolution of Kazakhstan's Image in China's Media Environment

Stage	Time	Core Image Label	Driving Factors	Public Perception Change (Chinese Netizens)
<i>Energy Cooperation Stage</i>	2004 – 2013	<i>Energy Corridor, Resource Supplier</i>	<i>China – Kazakhstan Oil / Natural Gas Pipeline Construction, China's Western Development Strategy</i>	«Kazakhstan = China's 'Gas Station'» (72% awareness)
<i>Strategic Upgrade Stage</i>	2013 – 2022	<i>Land Power Hub, Regional Governance Participant</i>	<i>«Belt and Road» Initiative, China – Kazakhstan Production Capacity Cooperation, Astana Expo</i>	«Kazakhstan = Belt and Road Key Node» (58% awareness)
<i>Multi-dimensional Deepening Stage</i>	2022 – 2024	<i>Civilization Crossroads, Regional Stabilizer</i>	<i>China – Central Asia Summit, Global Geopolitical Turbulence, Digital Economy Cooperation</i>	«Kazakhstan = Diversified Modern Country» (52% awareness)

The initial phase centered on energy cooperation as the core narrative thread, consolidating the foundation of bilateral trust by highlighting cross-border energy corridor development and mutually beneficial economic characteristics—yet concurrently confining Kazakhstan to a predominantly resource-supplier image in media representations. As cooperation deepened, media narratives entered a phase of strategic connotation expansion, manifested through strengthened positioning within the Belt and Road Initiative framework and the crafting of discourse systems around pivotal events. Notable examples include the deliberate construction of the “Silk Road Pearl” narrative symbol during the 2017 Astana Expo and the formulation of a “counterterrorism-stability” issue framework amid the 2022 political changes. These practices facilitated the transformation of Kazakhstan's media image toward a regional rule coordinator, institutionalizing bilateral cooperative mechanisms. Recent narratives have further expanded dimensionality by proposing the “Eurasian breadbasket” discourse contextually linked to the Ukraine crisis, while concurrently advancing deeper “community of shared destiny” “*认知* through cultural cooperation projects such as digital restoration initiatives for Turkic stone artifacts—thereby infusing cultural subjectivity implications into regional governance practices.

The complementary interplay between high-context strategic communication in state media (e.g., People's Daily's interpretation of the “Central Asian Gateway” and Guangming Daily's coverage of “multi-vector diplomacy”) and low-context emotional mobilization on social platforms has crafted a multidimensional image of Kazakhstan. This synergy is not accidental but rooted in China's national strategic design: from the 2015 BRI vision document to the 2021 14th Five-Year Plan, state policies explicitly require media to ‘translate national strategies into public consensus.

While official media legitimized strategic agendas through policy coding and summit mechanisms, grassroots platforms activated public empathy via tangible symbols like “handshakes” and “smiles.” This synergy between macro and micro narratives ensures both discursive legitimacy and public engagement, transforming abstract strategies into relatable common language—exemplified by the “Iron Camel Caravans” metaphor for the China-Europe Railway Express and the bidirectional recontextualization of cultural heritage.

**Limitations and Future Directions:** This study's focus on Chinese media warrants expansion to include Kazakh domestic and third-party international media for a holistic understanding of transnational image co-construction. Post-2024 developments in

digital economy and green energy cooperation may further reshape media narratives, necessitating longitudinal analysis. Theoretically, future research should explore the political economy of media images, investigating how digital technologies reconfigure geo-

political discourse and the role of non-state actors in challenging Western discursive hegemony. These inquiries could illuminate pathways for emerging economies to navigate global discourse hierarchies through non-confrontational narrative innovation.

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