Discussing Sinophobia in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Chinese migrants are perceived by different groups in Kyrgyzstan—and in what domains local people turn to Sinophobia. To date, Kyrgyzstani political leaders have tended to be Sinophilic, whereas bazaar traders and ordinary citizens, fearing large inflows of Chinese migrants, are Sinophobic. The article paints a picture of Chinese migrants' lives in Bishkek and their negative and positive experiences with local people. It concludes by demonstrating that lay people and radical nationalist groups alike deploy Sinophobic rhetoric in relation to China and Chinese immigrants living in Kyrgyzstan.

Keywords

Sinophobia – discrimination – Kyrgyz nationalists – Chinese migrants – conspiracy theories

1 Introduction

In the winter of 2014, a group of Kyrgyz men raided a karaoke club at the Taatan Chinese center, where Chinese businessmen allegedly spent their leisure time with Kyrgyz women. The raiders filmed their assault—which primarily targeted women—and circulated the footage widely on social media. In the video, the Kyrgyz men behaved aggressively toward the Chinese men, accusing them of being involved with the Kyrgyz young women, who were purportedly engaging in sex work. They also demanded that the Chinese men show their documents and visas. The raiders later revealed themselves to be members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* (originally *Kyrk-Choro*) movement, which is known for its

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radical nationalist stance. The movement's name is a reference to the forty loyal soldiers of Manas, the Kyrgyz mythical hero who brought the nomadic Kyrgyz tribes together and kept foreign enemies, including those from China, at bay.

This incident sparked controversy. Large swaths of the online public supported the raiders and harshly criticized Kyrgyz women, blaming them not so much for engaging in commercial sex as for doing so with Chinese men. Others, however, expressed their disdain for the violent act and similar incidents that expressed Kyrgyz nationalism and chauvinism. This incident and the public debates that followed epitomize how anti-Chinese sentiment is expressed in today's Kyrgyzstan.

This paper explores how Kyrgyzstani citizens perceive Chinese migrants and in what domains they express "fear of or contempt for China, its people, or its culture."[1] Sinophobia, a variant of xenophobia, is rooted in sentiments of fear and prejudice against people of Chinese descent.[2]

After the collapse of the USSR, the presidents of the Central Asian states all considered China to be their respective countries' second most important partner behind Russia and sought to develop good-neighborly relations. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan even ceded land to China to resolve border disputes that dated back to the nineteenth century.[3] Although Beijing may have reduced its claims to various border territories, fear of Chinese expansion remains common in Kyrgyzstan and neighboring countries.[4] This has been stoked by the arrival in the region of Chinese immigrants since the early 1990s.[5] Central Asian mass media tends to portray such population movements as organized expansion, fueling public fears that the Chinese government will eventually take over more of the region.

I draw the empirical basis of this paper from the qualitative component of research I conducted in 2015, which involved in-depth interviews, life stories, observations, and case studies in Kyrgyzstan's capital city, Bishkek. The research questions driving the paper are: (1) How do locals in Kyrgyzstan perceive China and Chinese people, and how do they express their Sinophilia or

1 *The Free Dictionary*, "Sinophobia," http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Sinophobia, accessed February 22, 2021.

2 Mabel Berezin, "Xenophobia and the New Nationalisms," in *The SAGE Handbook of Nations and Nationalism* (London: SAGE, 2006); Kenneth Tafira, "Is Xenophobia Racism?" *Anthropology Southern Africa* 34, no. 3–4 (2011): 114–21.

3 Catherine Owen, "Making Friends with Neighbors? Local Perceptions of Russia and China in Kyrgyzstan," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2018): 457–80.

4 Ibid.

5 Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia* (London: Hurst and Co., 2012).

Sinophobia? (2) What are the experiences of Chinese people living and working in Kyrgyzstan and how do they experience discriminatory behavior?

These questions are particularly interesting in light of locals' contradictory experiences and perceptions of China and Chinese people. Representatives of the younger generation of Central Asians, "who are in search of cost-effective career decisions,"6 have shown interest in learning Mandarin and exploring study and career advancement opportunities in China. Kyrgyzstan hosts a branch of the Confucius Institute, which was established by the Education Ministry of China with the aim of providing Mandarin Chinese language courses to people abroad.7 As a result, Chinese as a foreign language has become popular among students.8 Yet although many young people view China favor- ably, they nevertheless distrust the Chinese people who come to live and work in the region. There are many examples of discrimination against Chinese migrants working at bazaars and in other sectors.9 For example, Kyrgyzstani merchants have organized several protests against Chinese traders in the past. Laruelle and Peyrouse describe how local people attacked Chinese merchants in 2002 and 2004, damaging the Chinese and Uyghur sections at the Dordoi, Madina, and Karasuu bazaars.10 Conflicts with Chinese migrants living in Kyrgyzstan took place during the Tulip Revolution in 2005, as well as during the inter-ethnic riots in Osh in 2010.

2 Local Perceptions of China and Chinese Migrants in Kyrgyzstan

In Central Asia, China has several main interests, and these have evolved over time. In the early 1990s, China became one of Central Asia's most important partners and began to strengthen its relations with the region's countries. From the early years of Central Asian independence until the mid-1990s, Beijing's

6 Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi Konferentsii "Tsentral'naia Azia—Kitai: Sostoianie i perspektivy sotrudnichestva,"* KISS under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2008, http://www.kisi.kz/uploads/1/files/Ul9pR5Tv.pdf, pp. 15–16, accessed February 24, 2021.

7 Ainur Nogayeva, "Limitations of Chinese 'Soft Power' in its Population and Language Policies in Central Asia," *Geopolitics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 583–605.

8 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *Materialy Mezhdunarodnoi Konferentsii*.

9 Erica Marat, "Chinese Migrants Face Discrimination in Kyrgyzstan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 38, February 28, 2008, https://jamestown.org/program/chinese-migrants-face-discrimination-in-kyrgyzstan/, accessed February 24, 2021.

10 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*.

main concerns were demarcation treaties and border security,[11] as well as the prevention of Uyghur separatism.[12] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, China turned its attention to security and economic issues, which it sought to address primarily by developing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the mid-2000s, China shifted its foreign policy again, this time to take advantage of Central Asian energy resources: Kazakhstan is an exporter of oil and uranium, Turkmenistan supplies China with gas, and both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are sources of hydroelectricity.[13] Since 2005, Beijing has been cultivating intercultural exchange by promoting its language and culture in Central Asia and pro- viding educational opportunities for local youth.[14]

Understandably, Central Asian rulers and elites have seen China as one of their most important economic and political partners.[15] Presidents' families, Central Asian oligarchs, and many important political figures are also closely linked to China through their private businesses. The ruling circles actively promote friendly relations with China, comprising the region's "Chinese lobby."[16] Some government officials in Kyrgyzstan have even promoted favorable views of Chinese immigrants. For example, former governor of Osh Zhantoro Satybaldiev and Secretary of State Adakhan Madumarov argued against anti-Chinese activities and claimed that forcing Chinese workers, investors, and businesses out would lead to big losses for Kyrgyzstan.[17] Similarly, Tursuntay Salimov, the director of Madina Bazaar, argued that "Chinese traders bring money into Kyrgyzstan by paying for licenses for their boutiques and paying rents for their apartments."[18] Former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev like- wise spoke favorably about Chinese road-construction workers, claiming that "Chinese builders, they have been working day and night without rest, while

11 Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao, *Centrabl Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007).

12 Sebastien Peyrouse, "Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia," *Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 14–23.

13 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*.

14 Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

15 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*; James P. Dorian, Brett Wigdortz, and Dru Gladney, "Central Asia and Xinjiang, China: Emerging Energy, Economic and Ethnic Relations," *Central Asian Survey* 16, no. 4 (1997): 461–86; Rumer, Trenin, and Zhao, *Central Asia*.

16 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 113.

the local Kyrgyz builders could not meet the deadline because they were comparatively lazy."19

China's presence in Kyrgyzstan and the region is not limited to top-down agreements and inter-governmental projects, however. There are significant anti-Chinese forces in the country, including local bazaar traders and ordinary residents of the city, who fear large inflows of Chinese migrants. Chinese citizens, professionals, experts, and low-skilled laborers have worked and lived in the region since the early 1990s. Moreover, China supplies Central Asian countries with a wide range of affordable consumer goods: machinery, textiles, shoes and apparel, electronics, pharmaceutical and beauty products, food, etc.20 The combination of these two factors has led to the growing presence of Chinese traders in Kyrgyzstan's markets, such as Dordoi and Karasuu, in recent decades. Even though Kyrgyzstan in general, and those involved in commercial trade with China in particular, have reaped economic benefits from this trade, the growing number of Chinese businesspeople has ignited fears and anti-Chinese sentiment among locals. Many of their prejudices and biases against China and Chinese people are rooted in historic events—as well as rumors, hearsay, and the folk tradition.21 For example, epics such as Manas that were orally passed down from one generation to another present China as a long- standing enemy of the Turkic nomads.22

Today, many Central Asian specialists believe that Beijing seeks its own economic and political interests when it invests in development projects in the region.23 Ordinary people, meanwhile, reportedly fear that the ever-growing Chinese diaspora in Kyrgyzstan "could take up a share of the already scarce labor market and even dominate over some sectors of the national economy."24 The yellow press25 and social media have stoked these fears by spreading conspiracy theories about Chinese people in Central Asia, including the narrative

19 Amantur Zhaparov, "The Issue of Chinese Migrants in Kyrgyzstan," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (2009): 79–91, 87.

20 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*; Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

21 Catherine Owen, "The Sleeping Dragon is Gathering Strength: Causes of Sinophobia in Central Asia," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 3, no. 1 (2017): 101–19.

22 Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

23 Gulaiym Ashakeeva and Ulan Alymkul uulu Eshmatov, "Kitai—Tsentral'naia Aziia: Kto za kem?" *Radio Azattyk*, March 12, 2013, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan_china_central_asia/24926252.html, accessed February 24, 2021.

24 Nargis Kassenova, *China as an Emerging Donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan* (Paris: IFRI Russia/NIS Center, 2009), 20.

25 *The Free Dictionary*, "Yellow Press," https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Yellow+press#:~:text=reputation%20for%20sensationalism%5D-,yellow%20journalism,Also%20called%20sensationalism, accessed February 24, 2021.

that China wants to "take over" Central Asia.26 These concerns have found expression in conflicts between Kyrgyz and Chinese traders, including violent attacks on Chinese merchants27 and two large fires that destroyed the Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi Bazaar—where the majority of Chinese traders worked—in 2002 and 2008.28

Thus, locals' prejudices clearly present many challenges for Chinese citizens working and living in Central Asia. The two most prominent recent incidents of Sinophobia—and local fears about Chinese people dominating economic opportunities—unfolded as follows. In the first incident, on August 5, 2019, hundreds of local residents gathered at Solton-Sary field in Naryn region, where the Chinese enterprise Zhong Ji Mining is engaged in mining activities. Some of the Kyrgyz locals attending the demonstration entered the territory of the Chinese company and physically assaulted its employees, leaving dozens of Chinese citizens injured.29 In the second incident, on January 13, 2020, in the At-Bashi district of Naryn region, people rallied to oppose a Chinese investor's plan to construct a trade and logistics center. As in the conspiracy theories discussed by Owen, residents of At-Bashi expressed concern that "If this facility is constructed on the border, Chinese citizens will occupy land near the border, since 200 hectares are rented to them for 49 years." Following this series of protests, the Kyrgyz government cancelled the Chinese investment project.30 These recent anti-Chinese incidents illustrate how the population of Kyrgyzstan expresses Sinophobia—and, more importantly, that Sinophobiamay have lasting effects.

3 Methodology

In this research I use qualitative methods to examine how locals perceive China and Chinese people and to reveal how they express their Sinophilia or Sinophobia. The aim is to juxtapose these findings with the experiences of

26 Owen, "The Sleeping Dragon."

27 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*.

28 Henryk Alff, "Flowing Goods, Hardening Borders? China's Commercial Expansion into Kyrgyzstan Re-Examined." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 3 (2016): 433–56.

29 "Konflikt na Solton-Sary. Posol'stvo Kitaia otreagirovalo na situatsiiu (zaiavlenie)," *24.kg*, August 6, 2019, https://24.kg/obschestvo/125529_konflikt_nasolton-saryi_posolstvo_kitaya_otreagirovalo_nasituatsiyu_zayavlenie/, accessed February 24, 2021.

30 Mirlan Kadyrov, "Khab 'At-Bashi': opaseniia mestnykh zhitelei i pozitsiia pravitel'stva," *Radio Azattyk*, January 15, 2020, https://rus.azattyk.org/a/narynchane-vystupili-protiv-stroitelstva-logisticheskogo-centra-at-bashi/30377772.html, accessed February 24, 2021.

Chinese people living and working in Kyrgyzstan. My research triangulates between in-depth interviews, life stories, and observations. In this article, I draw on two large groups that I included in my study: Kyrgyz nationalists and merchants in marketplaces. I hypothesized that both groups would be Sinophobic, but for different reasons: one due to their extreme ethno-nationalist stance and the other due to economic competition. I focused on members of the *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* movement as representatives of the first group and bazaar traders in Bishkek as representatives of the second group.

Interviews with members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* were conducted in different places, including sometimes at respondents' places of work. Members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* came from different walks of life: they included medical doctors, university professors, lawyers, *manaschys*,31 history experts, traders, and others. In this paper, I draw on eight interviews with members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*. The economic group is represented by local traders in the Chinese section (*Dzhunkhai*) of Dordoi Bazaar and by traders in the Chinese shopping center Taatan. I conducted eight interviews with traders at their workplaces. Respondents from the Taatan shopping center worked there as translators and shop assistants for Chinese businesspeople and merchants. I conducted in-depth follow-up interviews and collected the life stories of those respondents who were willing to share their thoughts, as well as non- participant observations of how Chinese traders interact with local traders and people at the Taatan shopping center and in the Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi Bazaar.

Finally, in order to understand the other side of the relationship between Chinese migrants and local people and see how Chinese migrants are treated by locals, I conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with Chinese immigrants of different backgrounds: students, teachers, traders, one businessman, and one doctor. During the period of my research, I also regularly tracked news coverage about Chinese people in Kyrgyzstan. I tried to extrapolate the results of analysis across all methods to find similarities and differences in the answers of each group of respondents. I treat the media coverage of this issue as another data source that illustrates the types of rhetoric about China and the Chinese that are consumed by lay people; this rhetoric is subsequently deployed as locals interact with Chinese people in various spaces, including workplaces and bazaars as well as places of leisure such as Chinese cafés, restaurants, and so on.

31 A *manaschy* is a talented singer who can perform the Manas epic both artistically and creatively.

4 "We May Lose Jobs in Chinese Companies or in Constructionbut Not in Bazaars": Views of Kyrgyz Bazaar Traders

One of my respondents, Kylych (an alias), a Kyrgyz man in his sixties who works as a trader at Dordoi Bazaar, shared: "I do not consider Chinese as competitors, and instead take them as an example and try to be like Chinese traders. The Chinese traders motivate me." It was surprising to hear this as I started interviewing traders at Dordoi, one of the largest bazaars in Kyrgyzstan and which has turned into a hub for re-exporting Chinese commodities to neighboring Central Asian countries. Since bazaars and other places of trade have been sites of conflict, scholars have included merchants and traders among the groups that are more likely to be hostile toward Chinese people because of economic competition.32

While the existing literature predicts hostility from traders toward Chinese people due to their fear of economic competition, my study revealed more nuances in these relationships. Many of my respondents acknowledged that there were things they appreciated about their Chinese acquaintances. More interestingly, those who expressed Sinophobia shared that their concerns were

Figure 1 Main entrance of Dzhunhai market (Photo by author)

32 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*; Kassenova, *China as an Emerging Donor*.

based not on their fear of being outcompeted in the market, but rather on their perceptions of cultural differences between Kyrgyz and Chinese people. Most respondents who were concerned about the growing numbers of Chinese people migrating to Kyrgyzstan were also fearful about the potential for "soft occupation" and the eventual takeover of Kyrgyz lands by the Chinese.

Chinese merchants have been trading at the main markets since Kyrgyzstan became independent. At Dordoi, traders from China are mainly clustered in the part of the market that sells household appliances and electric goods; this section of the bazaar is called Dordoi-Dzhunkhai.33 According to respondents, the presence of Chinese traders brings economic benefits to Kyrgyzstan. Many traders acknowledged that they profited from their proximity to China, which gave them access to affordable commodities that they could shuttle back to Kyrgyzstan for wholesale and retail trade. Political elites and policy experts make the same point: having China as a neighbor mitigates Kyrgyzstan's land- locked geographical location and the fact that it is not as rich in oil and other natural resources as its Central Asian neighbors.34 Traders at Dordoi, Madina, and Taatan have perhaps the most regular interactions with Chinese people.

Drawing on these personal interactions, many of my respondents shared that their Chinese partners were responsible, honest, reliable, practical, and hard-working. I often heard local traders contrasting rich Chinese merchants with their wealthy Kyrgyz counterparts: the former do not show off their wealth and dress very simply, whereas rich Kyrgyz traders stand out because they dress very well, buy expensive cars, and often waste money on celebrations and conspicuous consumption. Despite their positive comments, however, the traders also expressed biases and prejudices against their Chinese counterparts.

The life story of one of my respondents, Kylych, is revealing with regard to inter-cultural misperceptions. Kylych has worked in the Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi for two decades. He is of mixed Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnicity; his parents were born in China and later moved to Kyrgyzstan. In his childhood, when they lived in Jalal-Abad, he was called "Chinese" by other children and felt unwelcome even though he was not ethnically Chinese. His family later moved to the Tokoldosh district in Bishkek (then Frunze), where most residents were Uyghurs. "In Tokoldosh," Kylych explained, "our family felt more comfortable because in Tokoldosh many nationalities lived together peacefully."

Kylych was one of those who ended up working at the bazaar out of necessity. A teacher during the Soviet era, he found himself unable to make ends meet in the early 1990s. In his estimation, the number of Chinese merchants

33 Zhaparov, "The Issue of Chinese Migrants."
34 Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

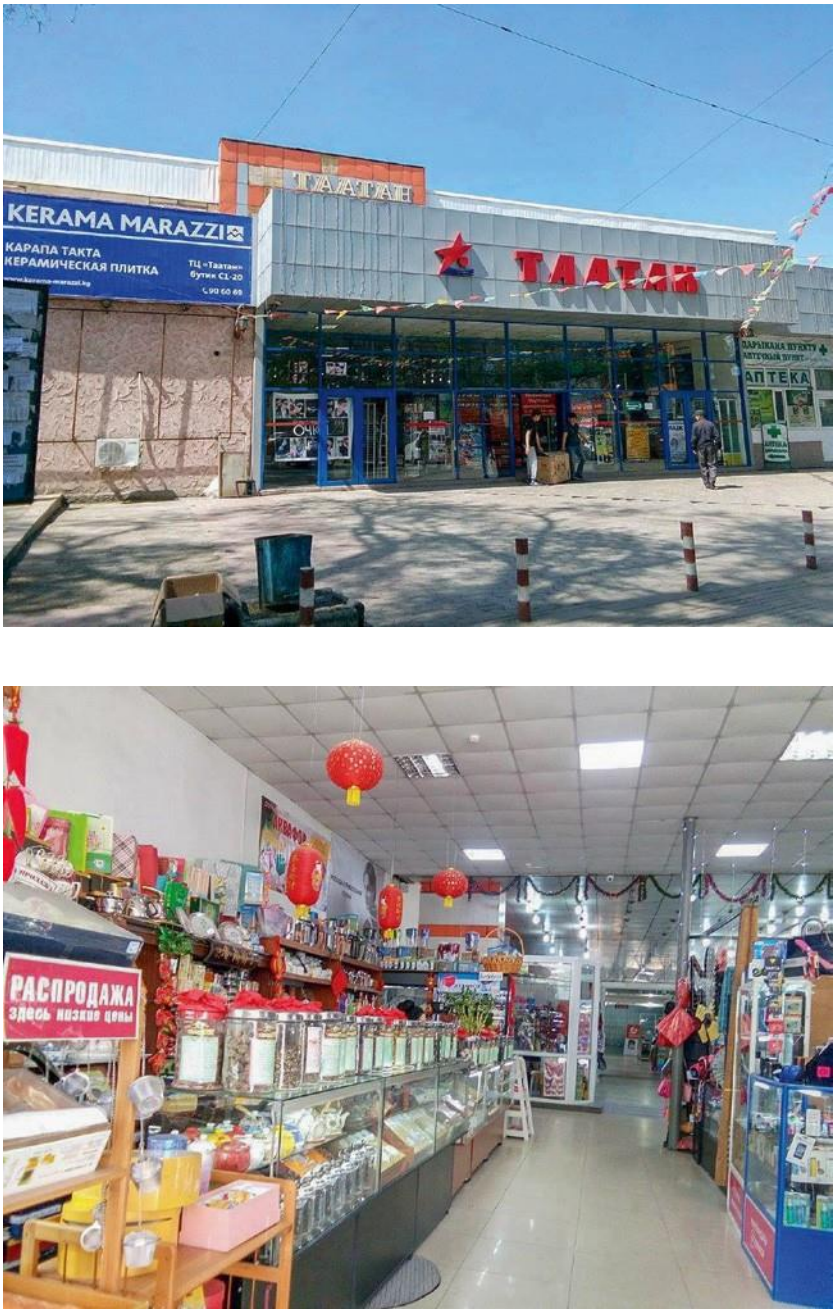

Figure 2 Taatan Chinese shopping center
(Photos by author)

working and living in Kyrgyzstan has increased dramatically since the late 1990s. Although he expressed gratitude for his economic gains from trade at Dzhunkhai and indicated that he was on friendly terms with many Chinese traders, he was wary of the potential consequences of the "Chinese expansion" for locals in Kyrgyzstan.

Drawing on his experiences interacting with his Chinese colleagues at the bazaar, Kylych shared some of his biases. He was convinced that his misunderstandings with his Chinese colleagues were mostly rooted in cultural differences—Chinese people did not respect their elders, he claimed, and they were not as fastidious about hygiene and cleanliness as Kyrgyz people. In addition, the Chinese entrepreneurs he knew were purportedly more interested in making money than they were concerned about their relatives:

> If someone dies or if we are invited to some ceremonies, we end our workday early, close the container, and go to the place where we were invited. In these kinds of situations, our Chinese neighbor traders think that the Kyrgyz are lazy. If a Chinese trader's relative dies, he or she just sends money to China. So it seems that for the Chinese, money is more important in relationships between relatives and family. The Kyrgyz are more warm-hearted and attached to relatives and family than the Chinese.35

Kylych went on to share his observations of how Chinese people behave in public spaces, claiming that they do not follow laws and regulations because they think they can bribe street-level and mid-level bureaucrats. When Chinese traders have trouble with locals, Kelych explained, "they call high officials, to whom they give bribes. Those officials, who are Kyrgyz, often come to the bazaar and support the Chinese." After discussing how corrupt Kyrgyz politicians are in cahoots with the Chinese, Kylych asked rhetorically, "What can I do if I am against the Chinese and the government gives them permission?"

The majority of Kyrgyz traders I interviewed similarly believed that Chinese traders were overwhelmingly enmeshed in corruption, believing that everyone in Kyrgyzstan can be bought off. In China, my respondents claimed, the legal system is very strong, whereas in Kyrgyzstan, it is easy to bribe officials. According to a respondent who works as a translator and seller for a Chinese businessman, the number of Chinese people in Kyrgyzstan is increasing and there are many Chinese merchants with irregular migration status who work in the Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi. Officials take bribes to turn a blind eye to this situation. The Kyrgyz traders hold that Chinese migration to Kyrgyzstan

35 Interview was taken at the Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi Bazaar in the spring of 2015.

Figure 3 Dzhunhai section of Dordoi bazaar
(Photos by author)

needs to be controlled and that the number of Chinese people should not exceed the quota for foreigners. When Chinese people buy houses and cars, marry locals, and obtain Kyrgyz citizenship, they should have to follow the law, the Kyrgyz traders contend.

Finally, Kylych voiced another commonly expressed bias: opposition to marriages between Chinese and Kyrgyz people. This found resonance with many other respondents, who claimed that such inter-ethnic marriages will lead inexorably to Chinese expansion. Citing various examples and anecdotal evidence, my respondents shared that such marriages are short-lived and based solely on rational calculation. Kylych succinctly summarized locals' attitude toward such inter-ethnic marriages:

> I would never recommend that Kyrgyz girls marry Chinese men, and it is impossible to love them. I have been working in Dzhunkhai for about twenty years, and I have witnessed a lot of unlucky short marriages between Chinese men and Kyrgyz women. They use each other. The Chinese marry the Kyrgyz in order to achieve their goals, and they obtain Kyrgyz citizenship. The local girls are mostly interested in their money, but unfortunately to this day I have not seen any married Chinese men buy a car or a house for their local wives. Most of the Chinese who marry locals are already married men. They have families in China, so our Kyrgyz women and girls are used by the Chinese. That being said, there are some very rare lucky marriages.

Overall, the views of my respondents who are bazaar traders reflected the broader trend among Kyrgyzstanis and Central Asians more generally of a high level of mistrust of China and Chinese people. These findings generally support the view that local traders are among the region's anti-Chinese groups,36 but the picture is more nuanced than that. Even those who expressed Sinophobic views explained that they were not concerned with economic competition so much as with cultural differences and the potential occupation of Kyrgyzstan's lands, resources, and even institutions of the family by the Chinese. The majority of traders were concerned with the increased number of Chinese people in general and inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese men and local women in particular, because they worry that this may lead to the "soft occupation" of Kyrgyz lands by Chinese migrants. These findings confirm the findings of other studies on Central Asia: that a majority of the local population believes that the immigration of Chinese citizens into the region will have a negative

36 Laruelle and Peyrouse, *The Chinese Question in Central Asia*; Kassenova, *China as an Emerging Donor*.

impact on resources, the job market, and criminality.37 My respondents further indicated that the expanding Chinese diaspora may lead to growing Chinese political influence in the country and the region. Such views are indicative not only of how Sinophobia is expressed by many locals in Kyrgyzstan, but also of the Sinophobic rhetoric that has had grave consequences when deployed by more radically inclined nationalist groups. In the next section, I discuss the case of the extreme nationalist organization *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*, demonstrating how its members have deployed Sinophobic views to perpetrate their assaults.

5 Nationalists: *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*

In interviews, members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* emphasized that they are not nationalist in a negative sense. They claimed that all nations are equal and that the group is not anti-Chinese. Despite their self-portrayal, however, the organization's members are known for putting their Sinophobia and general intolerance of other nations and ethnic groups into action. This is, after all, the group that raided the karaoke club at the Chinese center Taatan to assault Chinese men and Kyrgyz women on the grounds that these two groups did not have the moral right to spend their leisure time together. The group also stood behind the deportation of 32 Chinese workers without proper papers, as well as the demonstration at the Chinese foundry Shen Jin.

The *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* was organized in September 2010. The idea for the group is said to be born after a group of 40 men traveled to Altai to pray for the spirit of Manas.38 According to my interviewees from *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*, the trip to Altai led to an awakening of patriotic feelings and they have since decided to work on preserving Kyrgyz culture, traditions, and language. One respondent, a Kyrgyz man in his fifties, proudly stated, "I am a doctor. I have been working all my life only for my own interest. After the trip, I decided to serve the Kyrgyz nation and joined the *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* group to make at least a small effort to change things in our society for the better. And of course, being a doctor is also a service for my nation."

The idea of 40 men is taken from the epic Manas, which claims that the hero, Manas, had 40 close comrades. Hence the original name of the

37 Adilet Makenov, "Migranty ugrozhaiut suverenitetu nashei strany—Mavlyan Askarbekov," *KNews*, July 2, 2013, http://www.knews.kg/society/34065_migrantyi-ugrojayut_suverenitetu_nashey_stranyi_mavlyan_askarbekov/, accessed February 24, 2021.

38 Manas is the ancient mythical hero of the Kyrgyz. His adventures are narrated in one of the longest epics, the Manas epic.

organization, *Kyrk-Choro*: '*Kyrk*' means forty and *Choro* is a close associate of Manas. However, the number of members is not limited to 40; to avoid any misunderstanding, the group changed their name to *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*. According to *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* figures, each *oblast'*[39] has a different number of members, for a total of approximately 5,000 members across Kyrgyzstan. Before someone can join the organization, he—only men may join—must swear on the name of Manas. *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* members work without pay, driven by their own desire to serve their nation, and they claim that their aim is to change society for the better.

More narrowly, the organization's goal is to protect the nation's intangible values and traditional culture and pass them on to the younger generation by helping Kyrgyz youth gain knowledge of Kyrgyz culture, language, and history. Several members of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* claimed in interviews that modern Kyrgyz youth are indifferent toward national language, history, and culture. The organization spreads national values by visiting universities and colleges to give lectures, as well as by encouraging students to write nationalistic essays. In this way, they seek to teach youth to be patriots. According to them, patriotism means serving the country and the nation; it requires putting the nation's interests first. This starts close to home: being a responsible parent, providing children with a proper upbringing and education, and teaching youths to love the country. My respondents emphasized that patriotism is different from racism: being a patriot does not mean hating other nationalities but loving them as your own.

Kyrgyz-Chorolor respondents explained their past actions by reference to their dissatisfaction with the current government system and political parties. In their view, officials work only in their own interest rather than in the interests of the country. To counteract this, *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* created its own program for developing Kyrgyzstan, addressing many aspects of society, including migration, politics, economy, health care, and other issues. According to *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*, they are not opposed to foreign immigrants *per se*; they are not nationalist in the sense of loving their country above all other countries. They say to express a positive attitude toward all foreign migrants who live and work in Kyrgyzstan according to the law.

When it came to Chinese immigrants in Kyrgyzstan, however, a majority of respondents voiced negative views. Most of my respondents believed that the threat of Chinese expansion in Kyrgyzstan was tangible. Only two of the eight respondents did not think Chinese expansion was a possibility. The majority

39 An *oblast* is a certain type of administrative division.

believed that the number of "illegal Chinese" in Kyrgyzstan was increasing year on year, even as Kyrgyz people migrated to Russia, Kazakhstan, and other countries looking for better opportunities. Respondents blamed Kyrgyz government officials, who are enmeshed in corruption, for this situation. In their view, if the issue of Chinese illegal migrants is not addressed, then Kyrgyz land will be occupied by the Chinese. The majority of respondents claimed that China's mission is not to declare war but to occupy lands using soft power. They generally believed that many illegal Chinese migrants are currently working in Kyrgyzstan. One respondent, a 55-year-old Kyrgyz man, claimed that "according to the news, the number of Chinese migrants in Kyrgyzstan is about 300,000. It is the result of the unlimited numbers of illegal Chinese who are involved in corruption."

All respondents agreed that officials do not limit the number of Chinese migrants to the officially permitted number of foreigners, which is around 13,000. They further claimed that Chinese people are different from other immigrants in Kyrgyzstan in the sense that they try to settle there and get citizenship. As a Kyrgyz man in his forties claimed, "I see a lot of Pakistani, Indian and other immigrants living in Kyrgyzstan, but I do not fear these migrants, because they will go back home after a certain time. But Chinese [people] try to get Kyrgyz citizenship and remain in our country." Echoing this sentiment, another respondent recounted a Kyrgyz proverb: "If a bad owner of the house is unable to host, then the guests will feel themselves home" [*Zhaman uidun eesin konogu teileit*], implying that Kyrgyzstan's authorities need to be more stringent with immigrants and take advantage of their presence by imposing lawful taxes, instead of letting immigrants overstay their welcome.

Some respondents expressed the view that although the majority of workers in Chinese companies in Kyrgyzstan are local, they are not treated as well as those companies' Chinese workers. In July 2015, the members of *Kyrgyz- Chorolor* held a demonstration at the office of the Chinese foundry company Shen Jin to demand better conditions for local workers. The Kyrgyz brigade leader of that company told reporters that on July 27, two Kyrgyz workers beat up a Chinese worker, who emerged from the interaction with injuries. After that, the respondent said, representatives of the Chinese company fired all Kyrgyz workers. The organizer of the demonstration, a member of *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* named Zamir Kochorbaev, told the press that the purpose of the meeting was to achieve good working conditions and increase wages for local workers. Protesters demanded the provision of work clothing, sick leave, and First Aid kits. They stated that the company's buildings do not have even ventilation. Representatives of the Chinese company promised to meet

all the demonstrators' demands. *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* activists vowed to return in a month to check on the situation. The work of this company has been suspended since 2018.

One respondent said that he was interested in knowing the truth, so he discussed the situation with Kyrgyz workers in Boom Canyon, where Chinese and Kyrgyz workers were building a road. He asked Kyrgyz workers, "Why don't you work as hard as Chinese workers?" The Kyrgyz road construction worker replied, "Of course we do not want to work hard because we do the same job, but the Chinese are paid ten times more than us." According to the respondent, Kyrgyz officials allow injustice due to the overall quality of Chinese workers' construction work. The respondent further claimed that "Chinese workers do not treat Kyrgyz workers well, and they know our country's corrupt system." Some *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* respondents indicated that Chinese migrants behave arrogantly, feeling as though they are better than the Kyrgyz.

Finally, *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* echoed traders' opposition to inter-ethnic marriages between Kyrgyz and Chinese. Some respondents claimed that Chinese migrants are drawing Kyrgyz girls into a "dirty life." Referring to their raid on the karaoke club at Taatan center described in the opening vignette, my respondents shared that they decided to organize the raid for several reasons: not only did Chinese people run the karaoke club illegally, but it had become a place where Chinese men dated Kyrgyz women. As one of my respondents put it:

> If we do not do that, who will? Officials are involved in corruption; we care about our Kyrgyz women's future, and this is shame for all Kyrgyz. Never in history have Kyrgyz girls been involved in such dirty, dishonor- able things. Kyrgyz women were respected, and they were virtuous, clean, and smart! Unfortunately, in that club all girls were Kyrgyz. Only one was Russian. Those young women do not think about their future, and they sell their honor to the Chinese for a little money. How can they give birth to healthy children, and what kind of mothers will they become? It is a huge problem in our society.

Respondents suggested that no foreign migrant should be allowed to compromise Kyrgyz honor, women, law, and culture. Their purpose, they said, was "to make that Chinese club an example and show publicly how our officials are indifferent to our society and how we need to control and give good direction for Kyrgyz women. Of course, there are many clubs like that, but it was

Figure 4 Chinese cafes in Bishkek
(Photos by author)

just one example, and we tried to visit other such places." The club was subsequently closed and the 32 undocumented Chinese migrants deported back to China. Nevertheless, *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* continued to insist that "We are not anti-Chinese but anti-illegals."

In addition, respondents mentioned that Chinese people try to stay and obtain Kyrgyz citizenship. One way to do this is by marrying a Kyrgyz woman. All respondents opposed granting Kyrgyz citizenship to Chinese people. The majority of them expressed negative attitudes toward marriages between Kyrgyz and Chinese people, contending that Chinese migrants marry Kyrgyz women only to obtain Kyrgyz citizenship, then abandon those Kyrgyz women and their children.

According to respondents, inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese and Kyrgyz people have a negative impact on society. Such marriages allegedly allow Chinese expansion onto Kyrgyz land, as well as weakening Kyrgyz genes, which makes the children of Chinese-Kyrgyz marriages look Chinese. Respondents also believed that children born to Chinese parents could not be Kyrgyz patriots. Such unstable marriages, they said, would only harm the children, who will grow up as unwatched, uneducated, and backward people, and might even end up as beggars on the streets. Conversely, children born to Chinese parents might come to power in the future. If Kyrgyz-Chinese people end up working in the government, this will threaten the sovereignty of Kyrgyzstan, as such individuals would likely defend China's interests.

Overall, such Sinophobic views show that the question of China and its role in the region is a sensitive one, particularly in the case of inter-ethnic marriages and families. Nationalist patriarchal groups like *Kyrgyz-Chorolor*, which see themselves as true patriots concerned with the future of Kyrgyz ethnic identity, have used the above rhetoric to justify polygamy, which they claim would present a solution to the increasing numbers of inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese migrants and Kyrgyz women.40

When I interviewed *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* members, I also asked them to reflect on how, in the Manas epic, Chinese people are portrayed as enemies. I asked whether this in any way affects their attitude toward Chinese people today. They claimed that the portrayal of Chinese people as enemies in Manas does not affect their attitude toward contemporary Chinese people, because the Chinese people in the Manas epic were different from modern Chinese people. One *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* member claimed: "The Kyrgyz people are generous and, as it was said in Manas' seven commandments, we should not be nationalist. We must strengthen international economic and political relationships." These

40 Peyrouse, "Discussing China."

positive self-representations contrast with the Sinophobia and broader rhetoric of intolerance and hostility toward other minority ethnic groups and immigrant groups (like the Chinese) that are integral to the nationalist project in Kyrgyzstan. To understand how groups like *Kyrgyz-Chorolor* deploy nationalist rhetoric and how they justify violent actions against Chinese people and others in the country, it is important to remember how the Kyrgyzstani (and broader Central Asian) public may be interweaving the language of pride and honor regarding their ethnic identity with the language of fear and phobia around questions of Chinese expansion and the potential loss of sovereignty. This section has aimed to illustrate just how myths, assumptions, and hearsay may fuel the xenophobia of the "everyday citizenry."41

In order to more fully illustrate interactions between Chinese migrants and the local population, the sections that follow discuss the experiences and views of Chinese immigrants themselves.

6 Chinese Immigrants in Kyrgyzstan and Their Experienceswith Local People

Figure 5 Chinese trader woman. She married a Kyrgyz man and she has been workingin Dzhunhai section of Dordoi bazaar for about twenty years (Photo by author)

41 Ibid.

A 30-year-old Chinese woman recounted her experience when she first came to Kyrgyzstan:

> During my first visit to Kyrgyzstan four years back, we Chinese went to Osh Bazaar, and there was one Chinese-speaking student with us as a translator. Suddenly I heard a loud voice shouting at us. The student later translated [the statement] for us: "Chinese people want to occupy our country, they are bad people." This was when I realized that not all people in Kyrgyzstan welcome Chinese people. It made us upset.

I heard similar stories from other respondents who have lived and worked in Kyrgyzstan for different periods of time. My Chinese respondents came from different walks of life, with occupations ranging from doctors and teachers to traders and entrepreneurs, as well as students. Drawing on these interviews, I discuss their experiences of acceptance and discrimination in Kyrgyzstan. Many Chinese respondents emphasized that they appreciated Kyrgyzstan's beautiful nature, fresh air, and natural food. The majority claimed that Kyrgyz people are friendly and kind. Living and working or studying in Kyrgyzstan meant facing less competition to secure employment or a spot at a well- ranked university.

Figure 6 Chinese migrants at the Issyk-Kol lake
(Photo shared by Chinese student in Bishkek)

Speaking about positive interactions with locals, Chinese respondents emphasized that they had many local friends. They described linguistic and cultural exchanges with these friends: whenever possible, they would spend time together and practice each other's languages. My respondents' positive experiences also included receiving directions from friendly strangers on the street, getting things translated or explained by well-meaning acquaintances, and receiving decent treatment at local hospitals.

A Chinese doctor who has lived in Central Asia for 16 years indicated that he had many local friends and enjoyed living in the region. According to him, most people treated him well: "I have heard about many Chinese businessmen who were treated unfairly and badly by Kyrgyz people. But I mostly have good relations with locals, and I am treated well. Maybe this is because I am a doctor, and I have many Kyrgyz friends who are my patients. They respect me."

Alongside positive experiences, however, Chinese immigrants in Kyrgyzstan also faced misunderstandings, misperceptions, and judgment. One of respondents' major complaints about their lives in Kyrgyzstan was the scope and scale of corruption. As a 46-year-old Chinese man asserted, "Kyrgyz officials only think about their own interests; they do not think about Kyrgyz people. There

Figure 7 Chinese language teacher at the language center. She loves her job, and she has many students, the most of the Chinese language learners are female students.
(Photo by author)

is a large amount of corruption." This sentiment found purchase with many, especially those in private business. A 50-year-old Chinese businessman put it succinctly: "Even though China is Kyrgyzstan's best economic partner, Kyrgyz people do not welcome Chinese people, they do not trust us." My respondents shared that this assessment was based on their experience of being treated unfairly by Kyrgyz officials. For example, most male respondents complained about police officers, explaining that even when they had presented all the necessary documents, police officers would still demand bribes. To avoid such extortion, they reported that they would often pretend to not have any cash on them. Another respondent, a 30-year-old Chinese man, posed a rhetorical question: "I am following all the rules, I have documents. Why should I pay money?" Treatment by police officers seemed to depend on gender, however: female Chinese respondents did not report having experienced trouble with local police officers.

Similarly to their Kyrgyz counterparts, who shared many negative stereotypes about Chinese people, Chinese respondents shared negative impressions of Kyrgyz people. In their view, Kyrgyz people were irresponsible, lazy, and not punctual. A Chinese female respondent explained this perception from a historical perspective, suggesting that Chinese people have worked in the fields since ancient times, whereas Kyrgyz people, being nomads, did not have to worry so much about time. Another respondent, who teaches Mandarin in Bishkek, explained that Kyrgyz people were not punctual because they were not accustomed to living in busy metropoles: "I am not as surprised as other Chinese that Kyrgyz people have a habit of being late. In Chinese villages people also do not come on time. The majority of them do not follow exact time." Furthermore, my respondents claimed that laziness and irresponsibility on the part of their Kyrgyz acquaintances and colleagues was prevalent in the workplace. A Chinese businessman who served as the director of a large company in Bishkek explained:

> I had trouble with Kyrgyz staff in my company. As a director of the company, I gave a lot of money to them to fulfill some tasks, but they did not accomplish what I asked. They just used all my money. It is not fair that they deceived me. I think this kind of cheating is everywhere, including the Kyrgyz government.

Another respondent shared a similar experience: his Kyrgyz acquaintance borrowed $1,500 from him and did not return it on time—indeed, she only ever repaid part of the money. These kinds of money-related problems were common among Chinese respondents, as local people perceive them to have a

lot of disposable income. Some informants further shared that they had experienced situations where local apartment owners did not adhere to the con- tract and instead asked their Chinese tenants for extra money. There were also unpleasant incidents involving robberies.

As they shared these negative experiences, which resulted from Sinophobic views and discrimination, my respondents juxtaposed them against the kinds of benefits that Kyrgyzstan enjoyed due to its proximity to China and the presence of Chinese immigrants in the country. As they discussed different strategies for adapting to and integrating into local society, respondents discussed the benefits of inter-ethnic marriages between Chinese and Kyrgyz. My Chinese male respondents stated that they would be open to marrying Kyrgyz women because they are kind, friendly, beautiful, and more hard-working. However, there are also more practical concerns. A 52-year-old respondent shared: "I would like to marry a Kyrgyz woman rather than a woman of another nationality in Kyrgyzstan because it would make it easier for me to live in Kyrgyzstan." Although respondents were apprehensive about cultural and linguistic differences, almost all informants' attitudes toward marriages between Chinese and locals were positive. One migrant declared, "If the marriage is based on love, then why not marry? Love is important, but nationality does not matter."

The views of my Chinese respondents confirmed that Sinophobia is prevalent in Kyrgyzstan. As much as the Chinese respondents may have enjoyed making friends and finding common ground with locals, they have also experienced biases and stereotyping, as well as outright discrimination. Bringing Chinese migrants' voices into the picture is important if we are to understand social dynamics on the ground in relation to Sinophobia, as well as the broader processes of inter-ethnic relations, conflict, and the everyday projects of the citizenry.

7 Conclusion

The question of China's presence in Kyrgyzstan is a sensitive topic. This paper has discussed how the local population in Kyrgyzstan expresses Sinophobic views and how the rhetoric of Sinophobia informs discrimination and violence enacted by more radical nationalist groups. This documentation of views, prejudices, and assumptions is important if we are to understand the roots of violent incidents that have happened over the last decade, such as the violence that was unleashed against Chinese immigrants. In addition, this paper brought in the voices of Chinese immigrants themselves and illustrated the kinds of discrimination they face on a daily basis.

Hostility toward Chinese migrants among Kyrgyzstani people (and the broader Central Asian population) is not a new phenomenon: it has been shaped over the course of centuries and carries the legacy of historic trajectories, as well as difficult Sino-Soviet relations and the challenging border settlements between China and the post-Soviet states.42 The positive image of China held by today's Central Asian political elite and middle-class entrepreneurs is reflected in positive coverage of China and relations with the country by the media, which targets those who are "most likely to favor and benefit from increasing engagement with China."43

In contrast, as this paper has demonstrated, lay people and radical nationalist groups alike deploy Sinophobic rhetoric in relation to China and Chinese immigrants living in Kyrgyzstan. This may in part be due to their consumption of media that spew conspiracy theories, hearsay, and rumors about "Chinese expansion," exacerbating locals' fears of a loss of sovereignty. This paper contributes to this literature by demonstrating how different biases and prejudices form and are reinforced through everyday experiences and interactions between locals and Chinese migrants in contemporary Kyrgyzstan.

42 Owen, "The Sleeping Dragon."

43 Owen, "Making Friends with Neighbors?" 478.