Beyond friends and foes: immigration policymaking in contemporary China

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1. Questions

On the evening of September 27, 2020, I called Dave, a Shanghai-based visa agent. That afternoon, during an appointment with the Chinese immigration authorities in Shanghai, I had received a written warning for overstaying on my student visa. The irregularity was an unintended outcome of my attempt to combine the regular rules for visa extension with Covid-19 crisis management that allowed most migrants to overstay for two months, and the official processing my claim had assured me it was no big deal. However, based on my research I knew that even a small blotch on one's immigration file could hurt later applications for long-term residency. Once I left Shanghai's immigration building, walking on the broad streets of Pudong, I was suddenly worried. I remembered Dave, who I had previously interviewed. A fast-talking immigration agent, he seemed to enjoy figuring out policy puzzles and had the most experience in assisting foreign nationals in Shanghai to obtain permanent residency out of anyone I knew. He might know how to interpret this situation. Did he think I had just jeopardized my future chance at receiving a long-term residency status in China?

It was a question I had not previously considered during seven years in China residing on various types of visa and permits as a student, tourist, intern, employee, journalist, and now as a PhD-candidate on a student visa. Following China's new focus on economic development since the 1980s, the number of international migrants had rapidly increased from a small base. The rise in incoming migration stood in sharp contrast to the previous decades in which international mobility had been tightly controlled. However, state responses to this new trend remained limited. Policy reform had been gradual and focused on accommodating economic migration, largely ignoring issues of settlement and integration. A permanent residency program established in 2004 in the context of the country's World Trade Organization (WTO) accession was barely

implemented. Instead, China's permanent residency was awarded on an individual basis, often as a political favor to economic investors and cultural ambassadors. With a total of an estimated 20,000 permanent residency holders on a registered 850,000 foreign nationals, Chinese permanent residency gained a reputation of being the 'hardest green card in the world' to obtain (Lin 2019).

Living in China, I had operated within the common understanding that the pathways to a more permanent status within China's immigration legal framework were simply too narrow to be feasible. The vast majority of immigrants in China rely on annual renewal of their (usually employment-linked) residence permit to maintain their legal residence, although for some groups, such as traders from the Global South, obtaining even that type of stability has been difficult. In the past decades, while immigrant communities in China's major cities and border regions became increasingly diverse and permanent, from a policy perspective they have remained temporary. In this context, the Chinese word for 'immigrant' (移民) is hardly used for foreign nationals residing in China, who are usually referred to as foreigners (外国人), also by state actors.[1]

But some of this seemed to be changing. During my fieldwork years (2018-2020), Chinese immigration authorities were expanding access to permanent residency and multiple-year work permits for some groups of migrants, as part of a broader effort to institutionalize and improve China's ability to attract 'talent' from around the globe. While the threshold for these policies remained very high, limited to certain high-income, highly educated groups, I now knew people who did or would soon qualify for these categories. On the phone with Dave, the visa agent, I realized that my frame had shifted. In the course of researching China's immigration policy reform, I had started to believe I might eventually be in a position to apply for a longer-term immigration status myself. Dave's reply to me was cautiously optimistic. In the thirteen years he had dealt with Chinese immigration authorities, their process had become more transparent, but in the end "it always depends."

In late October 2020, a month after my call with Dave, I left China from Shanghai's Pudong airport. The large terminal building was emptier than I had ever seen it, with just a couple of international flights announced on the large screens. It turned out to be the first year of a period of radically reduced international mobility, that outlasted pandemic travel measures in the rest of the world. Following decades of increase, border crossings sharply dropped compared to pre-pandemic levels, for Chinese and foreign

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1 In this thesis, I do use the word 'immigrant' to refer to foreign nationals in China, in line with the inclusive definitions of international migration commonly used in migration research and advocacy.
E.g. the IOM definition of 'immigrant: "a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that [it] becomes his or her new country of usual residence."
In: "Who Is a Migrant? Glossary on migration." https://www.iom.int/node/102743, accessed on 28 March 2022. See section 4.c for further discussion.

nationals alike: in 2022, the total number of border-crossings came to only 17% of the 2019 levels (4.6% for foreign nationals). Following periods of unpredictable quarantine measures and high barriers for international travel without an end point in sight, many long-term foreign residents left China. While the Chinese authorities have not published any relevant figures, foreign organizations estimate about half of Chinas immigrants have left since the start of the pandemic.[2] As China's borders reopen in 2023, the next few years will see some reversal of this decline. But the future of immigration to China remains uncertain. For those who left, the lack of long-term residency rights heightens the barrier for return. One thing, however, is clear. For the global power China has become, the question of how to respond to the country's emergence as an immigrant destination will not go away.

In this thesis, I examine the politics of China's immigration policy field, as the country develops into a global power. International mobility has been a defining aspect of China's reform and opening since the 1980s (Xiang 2016). Following a period in which foreign contact was interpreted within a politicized framework of 'friends' and 'enemies' of China's socialist revolution (Brady 2003), the country's integration into the global system has led to unprecedented levels of transnational exchange, presented by the state as an inevitable part of China's "increasing national strength".[3] At the same time, the Chinese Communist Party has remained wary of internationalization when deemed at odds with its aim of domestic control. In this vein, this thesis interrogates the tension between internationalization and control in China's state building by focusing on immigration policy, which lies at the nexus of domestic and global state concerns. As a policy field that "belongs to the realm of domestic governance, but, with foreign nationals as its management target, has a strong outward-facing (涉外)[4] component" (Zhang 2022), immigration provides a lens onto China's wider state-making, especially as it relates to its selective embrace of internationalization. Zooming into the political dynamics of contemporary Chinese immigration policymaking, it addresses an overarching question: What can Chinese immigration policymaking tell us about China's ongoing state transformation as a global power?

Arguing that China's immigration politics can serve as a magnifying glass on China's state transformation, this thesis examines different aspects of the Chinese immigration policy field. It is built around five strategically selected cases, which

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2 E.g. Luna Sun, "EU chamber in China intent on getting Beijing to 'move the needle' as ideology curtails commerce," *South China Morning Post,* November 18, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3200003/eu-chamber-china-intent-getting-beijing-move-needle-ideology-curtails-commerce.

3 "王勇：组建国家移民管理局" (Wang Yong: establish the State Immigration Administration), *Xinhua*, March 13, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018lh/2018-03/13/c_137035628.htm

4 Or 'involving the foreign': pertaining to foreign countries, affairs, institutions, or individuals, as opposed to internal or domestic, especially in public affairs.

zoom in on central-level, local-level and state-society immigration reform dynamics: first, a case study of national-level institutional reform, lays out key drivers and obstacles around the establishment of China's National Immigration Administration (NIA) in 2018 (Chapter 2). Then, complementing case studies on local-level policy experimentation discuss two ends of the spectrum of economic migration, the core of China's immigration system: high-income professional migration reforms in metropolitan Shanghai (Chapter 3), and low-income labor migration reforms in the Southwestern region of Guangxi, bordering Vietnam (Chapter 4). Because of their dynamism, China's major cities and border regions have attracted the vast majority of immigrants to China. With local-level experimentation a key driver of policy innovation in reform-era China, these locations are particularly meaningful sites for examining policy reform conditions. Finally, I examine societal immigration attitudes (Chapter 5) and elite-public interactions surrounding a controversial immigration reform (Chapter 6), which I argue are an increasingly relevant factor in Chinese immigration policy-making.

Together, these case studies provide unique empirical material and insight into the wider public opinion landscape on immigration and the dynamics behind the emerging politicization of immigration. Both individually and combined, they expand the existing knowledge base on Chinese immigration politics and how it is tied into China's state transformation, focusing on three cross-cutting sub-questions: 1) What factors drive change and continuity in China's immigration policy? 2) How do state actors manage tensions between developmental pragmatism and the increasing policy focus on governance and security? 3) What are societal attitudes towards immigration and to what extent are they a policy factor? Throughout the case studies, the thesis also situates China's immigration policymaking comparatively, asking: How does China fit with regional and global patterns of immigration policy-making in an early-stage immigrant reception context? As an immigrant-receiving authoritarian state, the case of China is essential to an emerging literature of immigration politics outside Western, democratic or high-income contexts.

2. Context

The People's Republic of China (P.R.C.), founded in 1949 after a prolonged period of war, aimed to build a sovereign nation, free from foreign interference. Wanting to leave behind China's 'Century of Humiliation', as the defeats to and invasions by imperialist powers since the mid-19th century were framed, the new socialist regime considered the control of foreign migrants an important aspect of what party Chairman Mao Zedong called the "cleaning of the house" of foreign influence (Gries 2004). Throughout the 1950s, most of Chinas foreign-born population – traders, investors, missionaries, and educators, many of Euro-American, Japanese, and Russian origin, who had populated the semi-colonial enclaves established by imperialist powers in coastal and Northern

China – left the country or was expelled (Gongan 2010, Bickers 2013). In the late 1960s, China's foreign population shrank even further, as international mobility and affiliation became highly politicized during the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Wang 2013). In these decades, China continued to invite groups of foreign experts, diplomatic delegations and tourists from countries with which it was politically aligned. However, overall this was a period of limited immigration, in which both in- and outgoing international mobility were viewed through an ideological Cold War lens. At the same time, the Chinese state controlled internal migration, as part of a development strategy in which rural areas supported urban industrialization (Chan 2019).

With the start of China's reform era in the late 1970s, international mobility was rehabilitated as part of a modernization strategy centered around industrial and technological development. Registered border entries by foreign nationals rapidly increased from an average of 200,000 per year in the 1949-1978 period to 5.6 million in 1991 (Gongan 2010). Economic developmental zones in China's coastal regions that started to attract foreign capital developed a demand for both internal and foreign migrants. Investors, managers and technicians of foreign nationality, many of Chinese descent, started moving to China (Ye 2009). Foreign language teachers soon followed, as Chinese demand for foreign language skills exploded. Steadily increasing throughout the 1990s, the growth of immigration to China accelerated following China's accession to the WTO in 2001. South Korea, Japan, and the United States, as well as bordering Vietnam and Myanmar became key migrant source countries, but China's position as an economic hub increasingly attracted migrants from around the globe, including traders and students from the Global South (Pieke 2011). In the 2010s, the number of foreigners in China continued to increase, but the growth rate slowed down. The 2020 census counted 1.4 million 'overseas residents' (境外人员) in mainland China—including 846,000 foreign nationals and 585,000 residents of Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, which the Chinese state considers a separate category.[5] Almost one-third of these immigrants live in the southern province of Guangdong, the manufacturing and internal labor migration hub where national leader Deng Xiaoping launched China's economic reform policies. As opportunities in China increased, a growing percentage of the Chinese nationals who had moved abroad – around 10.5 million in 2020 - also started to return to China (Zweig et al 2008).

Alongside its economic reforms, China's political system underwent a transformation from a largely totalitarian state, in which society mobilized to fulfill the leader's revolutionary agenda, to a technocratic authoritarian regime overseeing an unprecedented development trajectory (Shirk 1993, Naughton 1995). To remain

5 Due to China's strict Covid-19 border restrictions and an exodus of immigrants from China at the start of the pandemic, this figure is lower than that in previous years. See Annex 2 for more data and a discussion of the fragmented sources available.

in power, the Chinese Communist Party radically adjusted the path to its long-term goals of making China prosperous and powerful by embarking on selective and gradual marketization. Revolutionary socialist rhetoric was supplemented by a technocratic jargon of economic development and modernization. While retaining core Leninist principles, such as the Party's leading role in society, the regime adopted many neoliberal governing techniques into its authoritarian context, from comprehensive administrative reforms to policy consultation mechanisms (Pieke 2016: 9-10). In China's Party-state, every level of Chinese government (central, provincial, prefectural, county, township) has parallel Party institutions in charge of key decision-making. Rather than weakening the state, the success of China's market reforms has gone hand in hand with significant state and Party building (Ang 2022).

Since the 1990s, the bureaucracy has gone through several rounds of reform and expansion, especially at sub-national levels. Central-local dynamics form a key axis of China's political system. In a vast country with widely varying local economic conditions, a fragmented central government and strong traditions of localism, the center cannot easily impose its agenda on sub-national governments. Instead, throughout the reform era, cycles of centralization and decentralization have followed each other (Lieberthal 1992, Landry 2008). The central state has often encouraged local state actors to be entrepreneurial in their pursuit of local development, and to design experimental policy pilots that might be rolled out more broadly (Heilmann and Perry 2011). Developing a dynamic policy style that also featured widespread corruption and power abuse, local governments have often been at the forefront of policy reform. Since the late 2000s, as China grew richer but also more unequal, the China's state has grown more concerned with losing control, and has progressively reined in both local government and the societal autonomy that had developed in this period (Economy 2018).

Meanwhile, China's immigration management underwent significant change. From a "hyperpolitical" task aimed at complete control, authorities shifted to a self-declared focus on "serving and managing" the country's foreign population (Brady 2003: 3, Yang 2012, Ye and Jing 2019). In 1983, China opened dedicated exit-entry and foreigner management offices, run by the public security authorities.[6] This step was followed in 1985 by the adoption of first national immigration legislation in the reform era, the Law on the Control of the Exit and Entry of Aliens (外国人入境出境管理法), normalizing the presence of foreigners in the country. However, even within the Chinese state apparatus, the immigration system is known for being especially fragmented across departments. The Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the main departments responsible for foreigners' legal entry and residence in the country, but other foreigner management functions are spread out among

6 See Annex 1 for an overview of key events in China's reform era immigration management.

more than thirty government actors with large regional variation in implementation and priorities (Liu 2015). Added complexity comes from the distinction the Chinese state makes between mobility to and from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, considered cross-border but part of China, and other destinations, and unclear state terminology around ethnic Chinese and former PRC nationals with a foreign nationality. Since the 1980s, the immigration policy field has seen a proliferation of laws and regulations – many not publicly available – with key policy initiatives focusing on attracting skilled professionals, educated returnees and foreign students, and on controlling irregular migration.

In this context, both researchers and policy makers characterize China's immigration system as incomplete. Despite frequent calls for reform, formal changes have been slow to materialize. Currently the main piece of immigration legislation, the 2012 Exit-Entry Management Law (中华人民共和国出入境管理法) took over a decade to draft, and left those hoping for more comprehensive immigration legislation disappointed (Zhu and Price 2013, see Chapter 2 for more detail). China's visa categories have remained restrictive, with migrants on spousal or student visas unable to work, and foreign employees lacking robust labor rights (e.g. Ahl et al 2020). At a central level, the public security authorities that dominate decision-making have been largely silent on the issue of immigration, only rarely making public statements and publishing almost no national figures. Instead, localities with higher concentrations of immigrants have often been at the forefront of immigration policy reform, developing local legislation and formal and informal policy practices more suited to long-term settlement of migrants deemed beneficial to local development (e.g. Cheuk 2016, Xu 2018, Lehmann and Leonard 2019, Lin 2019). Interspersed by occasional enforcement campaigns, local authorities largely accommodated economic migration, with many long-term foreign residents residing in China on short-term visa or irregularly (Pieke 2011: 44, Habicht 2020).

China's immigration management entered a new phase in the last decade, after Xi Jinping became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012. In 2016, China joined the International Organization for Migration (IOM), signaling a growing willingness to participate in international migration governance (Liu and Weng 2019, Zhang and Geiger 2020). The next year, new foreigner working regulations significantly updated China's policy framework for economic migration, introducing new categories for 'highly skilled,' 'professional,' and 'other' economic migrants, and reducing the role of individual officers' discretion in issuing visas (Ahl and Liu 2018). In 2018, Beijing undertook two institutional reforms that suggested international mobility had risen on the central leadership's policy agenda. First, the government established the country's first national migration agency, the National Immigration Administration (NIA), tasked with coordinating migration affairs government-wide. For the first time in the reform era, its officials acknowledged China's status as an immigrant destination, and called

for the urgent development of immigration management "with Chinese characteristics" in line with the country's rise in overall state power (NIA 2019). Second, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, responsible for diaspora affairs (including former Chinese nationals), was moved to the United Front Department, a key Chinese Communist Party department (Liu 2022). As this thesis shows, these reforms were part of a period of increasing momentum for immigration policy reform.

3. Contributions

This thesis argues that the politics of China's immigration policy, lying at the nexus of domestic and global state concerns, provides key insights into China's state transformation in the last decades. In contrast to these ways in which China's rise make the rest of the world "more Chinese" (Pieke 2016: 168), immigration policy offers a privileged vantage point into the ways the Chinese state responds to the 'foreign at home'. Indeed, the state's domestic approach to immigration reveals a tension between the unprecedented levels of transnational exchange it has welcomed and its concerns about internationalization. In any state, but certainly for a regime whose state-building mission has been to restore China's global status following a period of imperialist invasion, immigration reform relates to core aspects of nation-state ideology and identity. In the words of Algerian sociologist Sayad (1999: 6), in China, too, "thinking about immigration means thinking about the state".

While immigrants are affected by all public policy, in this thesis 'immigration policy' refers to the targeted formal and informal policy discourses and practices that state actors direct at governing and regulating the entry, exit, residential status and rights of incoming (including some groups of return) migrants (see also Czaika and de Haas 2013). I use the term 'immigration policymaking' to discuss the political processes and power relations underlying state decisions on how to govern and regulate the volume and rights of immigrants. This encompasses interactions between state and party actors in different bureaucracies, regions, and across political levels, as well as power relations between state actors and non-state actors – experts, public opinion - relevant to the shaping of immigration policy. Finally, 'immigration politics' encompasses these policymaking dynamics, but also includes what Natter and Thiollet (2022: 1518) call "structural political factors" relevant to the governance of immigration, such as the historical state formation process, institutional path dependencies, and narratives of national identity.

By exploring how shifts in Chinese approaches to immigration provide insight into China's wider state and developmental transition, this thesis builds on and contributes to scholarly debates on a) China's migration patterns, b) internationalization and c) policymaking, as well as d) global migration politics.

a. Integrating reform era migration policy in the study of China's migration patterns

Research on immigration to China has rapidly increased since the 2000s, as China's new identity as an immigrant destination rather than "a place where foreigners happen to live" (Pieke 2011: 62) became more pronounced. Pioneering researchers like Liu Guofu and Weng Li in immigration law, and Li Minghuan in overseas Chinese studies, began to develop comparative critiques of China's incomplete and fragmented immigration laws and policies (Weng 2001, Liu 2006, Li 2011). In the social sciences, geographers and anthropologists started to explore the formation of immigrant communities in China's most cosmopolitan areas (Li 2008, Li et al 2009, Bodomo 2010, Farrer 2010, Pieke 2011, Lü 2011). Building on this cross-disciplinary, multilingual field, this thesis centers Chinese state and societal perspectives on this development, and explores connections between migration to China and the governance of out-going and internal Chinese migration flows.

As the field consolidated, research into immigration to China has greatly expanded in scope and level of detail. With early work especially focused on Euro-American professionals in Beijing and Shanghai, and African traders in Guangzhou, now a substantial literature examines the lives of immigrants from different parts of the world, living across China, from traders, teachers, scientists and other professionals, to foreign spouses, students, border workers and returnees (e.g. Cheuk 2016, Leonard 2019, Lehmann 2014, Wang and Chen 2021, Camenisch 2019, Barabantseva 2015, Sier 2022, Wei 2014, Ho 2018). Emerging survey research, such as that by the Study of Foreign Residents in China (SFRC) survey conducted among foreign nationals in seven Chinese cities, has provided data on foreigners' social organization and settlement patterns, among other things (e.g. Wang and Cao 2019, Jin and Fan 2019, Huang 2019). There is also growing insight into the breadth of issues affecting foreigners in China, with publications examining foreigners' rights protection and second-generation migrant citizenship, as well as immigrants' social life, experiences accessing education, healthcare, or practicing their religious and cultural identities (e.g. Ahl and Czoske 2021, Jordan et al 2022, Barabantseva et al 2019, Ma 2019, Adebayo 2023, Haugen 2013, Castillo 2015).

Overall, the focus of this literature has been on migrant rather than Chinese perspectives. However, these case studies often provide much insight into local state-migrant interactions, and what Lehmann and Leonard call the "contradictions" migrants face as they deal with the complex bureaucratic processes governing their presence (2019: 2). These issues have been examined in most detail in the southern city of Guangzhou, where especially African economic migrants have been celebrated for their contribution to trade and diplomatic relations, but have faced structural marginalization after their presence became controversial in the late 2000s (Lan 2015). Studies of the subsequent crackdown show how police and exit-entry authorities tightened migration

control through instruments like targeted surveillance, registration requirements and restrictions on migrant areas of residence, leading to what Li et al (2012) describe as the "collapse" of these communities (see also Huang 2018, Haugen 2019, Wilczak 2018). Studies of border area migration, such as at China's border with Russia, or in its Southwestern region, note a similar discrepancy between the local state's celebration of migrant economic and cultural contributions and a growing emphasis on combating irregular migration from the late 2000s onwards (e.g. Barabantseva 2015, Pulford 2022).

Outside these localities, the study of China's immigration politics has lagged behind.[7] This is especially the case when it comes to the implementation of immigration law.[8] More recently, however, there has been a growing focus on studying China's wider immigration and border governance. Key examples include the work of Lü and Guo (2018) on the political risks of fragmented immigration governance, that of Habicht (2020) on the relationship between legal reform and regulatory campaigns, Plümmer (2021) on how state (media) discourse on these campaigns securitizes irregular migrants, Schubert et al (2021) on norm diffusion in several areas of Chinese immigration governance, Plümmer (2022) on subnational differentiated immigration governance practices, and Zhang and Geiger (2020) on China's ambitions in international migration cooperation. Recent studies of state media discourse on immigration also form a window into official discourse on foreigners and its boundaries amidst a wider state silence on the position of immigrants in Chinese society (Gan 2020, Huang 2021). In dialogue with this dynamic field, this thesis aims to provide a more comprehensive account of the key political dynamics structuring Chinese state responses to immigration.

In addition to its focus on Chinese state approaches to immigration, this study contributes to a growing body of work that looks at how China-foreigner societal interactions evolve as the country becomes a global power. In the reform era, migrants from high-income countries, especially those with white skin, have experienced an outsized labor market demand for their skills and identity that came with a "re-emergence of white privilege during the period of Chinese reform and a preference for values associated with Western modernity" (Camenisch 2022: 13, Farrer 2014).

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7 Brady's important study of the foreign affairs system (2003), showing how principles of strict China-foreigner boundaries (内外有别) continued to influence foreigner management in the early reform era, became less relevant to ordinary migrants with the dismantlement of restrictions on foreigners' residence and mobility. However, the foreign affairs system remains part of the immigration policymaking system, and continues to play an active role in managing groups like foreign journalists and diplomats, as well as in the selection of foreign recipients for (local) state awards and other honors.

8 A significant body of Chinese policy literature does describe and critique existing immigration frameworks and their implementation. Often written by practitioners within relevant state institutions or long-term observers of the system, this literature provides valuable information on the otherwise highly opaque immigration policy process. I draw on this work throughout this thesis. However, primarily aimed at internal policy debate, these publications do not usually specify empirical or theoretical contributions and are not included here.

Immigrants have also been the recipients of developmentalist preferential state policies, such as full scholarships for foreign students and subsidies and tax-breaks for foreign professionals (Liu 2011). At the same time, an emerging literature on social incorporation finds that foreigners in China experience a range of obstacles to their integration, from "everyday othering" (Yang and Self 2020) to structural exclusion and racialization (e.g. Cheng 2019, Castillo 2020, Litman 2022). Importantly, recent research finds that these reception dynamics are changing as a more "Sinocentric' globalization" gains traction (e.g. Farrer 2019: 206, Lan 2022). With existing studies into Chinese attitudes on immigration largely focused on online discourse or local attitudes, especially towards African migrants in Guangzhou (e.g. Cheng 2011, Liang and Liu 2016, Ang and Fran 2023, for a key exception see Han 2017a), this thesis aims to investigate immigration attitudes among a broad cross-section of the Chinese population, with relevance to the study of Chinese changing self-perceptions as well as immigrants' possibilities to belong and integrate into Chinese society.

As immigration to China is receiving more dedicated research attention, the question arises of how it connects with the study of other Chinese migrations. Building on work by Elaine Ho and others who point out that in a country with a global diaspora as large and diverse as China's, those who emigrate, immigrate, and re-migrate might well overlap (Ho 2019: ix, Schubert et al 2021), I argue that the politics of immigration as described in this thesis offer many points of connection with the study of return migration, which traditionally has been part of China's diaspora studies field. While the Chinese state has encouraged return migration, in practice return migrants face significant barriers. For returning Chinese nationals, especially those without higher levels of education, the *hukou* household registration system – a key tool of population control that ties citizens' social rights to their place of registration – can act similarly to an international immigration regime "by precluding dual residency and selecting and documenting potential citizens" (Liu 2020: 2). Meanwhile, return migrants who naturalized elsewhere and gave up their Chinese citizenship in accordance with China's nationality law have to navigate life in China as foreign migrants. The exclusion they experience can lead to "dissonance" and re-migration among return migrants (Ho and Ley 2014).

As You (2020) points out, only an integrated Chinese migration field can do justice to China's extraordinary migration trajectory and the fact that, due to its rapid development, the country is experiencing significant out-going, return and other incoming migration all at the same time. This thesis shows how Chinese authorities' recognition of the needs of naturalized return migrants forms a key part of the impetus for immigration reform, and calls for more integration of research on the immigration and diaspora policy fields (Liu and Van Dongen 2016, Liu 2022, Van Dongen 2022, Richter and Habicht 2022, Xiang 2003). I also follow the lead of some researchers connecting Chinese state treatment of international and internal migrants (Lan 2017,

Wilczak 2018, Ishitsuka 2020, Xiang and Ma 2019, Zhu and Qian 2021). Extending this comparison to the study of Chinese views on immigration, I find that both emigration and internal migration, as paradigmatic aspects of reform era development, shaped knowledge of and attitudes towards immigration (see chapter 4). Finally, as Xiang (2016) has argued, the Chinese state's decision to facilitate mobility through a range of enabling and regulating policy measures has been instrumental to the rise of both internal and international reform era mobility, and made China "a space of flows and connections" (677) that could also accommodate incoming mobility. An integrated approach to Chinese migration politics can contribute to the larger question of change and continuity in reform-era state approaches to mobility.

b. Mobilizing immigration politics as a lens on the Chinese state's conflicted approach to internationalization

The significance of China's immigration politics goes beyond the issue of how the state manages increasing incoming and return migration to how it deals with broader issues of internationalization and changing self-Other relations. Worldwide, the governance of human mobility has proven more political than other aspects of globalization, like capital or trade flows (e.g. Sassen 1994, Kalm 2010). In the Chinese case, I argue that a reform trajectory of pursuing global economic integration while minimizing political liberalization has resulted in a conflicted attitude towards internationalization. My analysis shows how the Chinese state currently aims to expand its immigration system. However, the interplay between China's state-building program, domestic politics dynamics and national identity discourses limits the space for formal reforms, especially liberalizing ones. The growing focus on institutionalizing also renders existing internationalization rooted in informal policy practices more fragile.

The start of China's reform era coincided with an acceleration in global flows of capital, trade and ideas worldwide, also known as globalization. As leader Deng Xiaoping announced in 1980 that China should learn from the outside world, 'reforming and opening up' became a set phrase, reflecting a belief that as the country intensified its external relations, more domestic reform momentum could be achieved (Xiang 2009). Chinese society embraced international engagement, from an 'emigration craze' to a strong demand for products and scholarship from economically developed countries (Nyiri 2001, Chen 1995). As Shih notes, in this period, an image of 'the metropolitan West' as an object of emulation was prioritized over a critique of the colonial West (2001: 36). Central commitment to the developmental strategy deepened with China's entry into the WTO in 2001, and the subsequent organization of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. But despite the considerable depoliticization of international contact in this period, the domestic societal change - or internationalization - this global integration brought about also triggered elite and popular unease, from fears of Western 'spiritual pollution' to Leftist critiques of marketization (e.g. Miller 2011). The Chinese state has remained

especially conflicted on changes in China's cultural and ethnic diversity that do not easily fit with existing visions of 'the Chinese nation' (中华民族) as inherited from early 20th century nationalism, and has resorted to ethnocentric discourse at times of domestic instability (He 2018). While economic reforms were institutionalized, on these issues of diversity Chinese authorities have refrained from fundamental reform. Instead, "existing policies are reasserted, tweaked, or combined" (Pieke and Barabantseva 2012: 6, Zhou 2022). Now that China is an economically powerful global player, it is a good moment to examine Chinese state and societal views on an issue that can embody these tensions, like foreign migration.

Under president Xi Jinping, the Chinese state's attitudes towards internationalization have again become more openly conflicted. Researchers have analyzed the country's increasingly explicit ambitions to become a leading global stakeholder, from its growing clout in key international organizations to its emerging efforts to protect its citizens and wider interests abroad (Tan 2021, Fung 2019, Foot 2020, Ghiselli 2020). At the same time, these efforts have been accompanied by a revival of "ideological orthodoxy," or the idea that the Party needs to restore faith in its Leninist and cultural roots and maintain a starker demarcation between China and the West in order to survive (Gore 2022). China's foreign diplomacy has adopted a more aggressive nationalist mission "from seeking a peaceful international environment for domestic development to expanding China's global reach as a linchpin for the Great Rejuvenation" (Zhao 2022). Domestically, these trends have resulted in less space for cross-cultural exchange, for instance at universities or through the activities of "Western embassies, consulates, media operations, and NGOs operating inside China," who the state identifies as potential 'anti-government forces' (ChinaFile 2013).

This study contributes to a body of work that analyzes these tensions in Chinese state behavior and messaging by studying its domestic politics. These works highlight the variety of state and societal actors involved in producing China's external actions, from economic interest groups to nationalist public opinion (e.g. Weiss 2019a, Weiss 2019b, Ruhlig 2022, Wang 2022, Qin et al 2021). My findings provide insight into the institutional and ideological limits individual state actors can run into when it comes to internationalization. While many external observers tend to take Chinese state rhetoric at face value, studies of policy implementation are crucial to gain a grounded understanding of state action in this area. Research into China's 'talent attraction', the state programs that since the 1980s have aimed to make China more internationally integrated and competitive, illustrate this complexity. Studies on these efforts show that, while returnee and immigrant 'talent' have played an important role in advancing China's global integration (e.g. Zweig et al 2004), the success of state-sponsored talent programs and a variety of other subsidies has been limited by factors ranging from to unattractive research infrastructure to inflexible immigration policies (Zweig and Wang

2013, Zweig et al 2020). Returnee 'talent' brought symbolic capital and progressive views (Li 2006, Xiang 2011, Han and Zweig 2010), but also faced public criticism and resistance, as well as fluctuations in demand for their skills (Zweig and Yang 2014, Lu et al 2022, Hao et al 2016). Adding to these findings, this thesis' case study on the politics of skilled migration policy (chapter 3) points to implementation barriers of internationalization that intensify with politicization.

These complex implementation dynamics intersect with shifts in top-down incentives, and the extent to which central governance priorities rely on 'opening up.' As Shirk (1993) and Zweig (2002) detail in their discussion of China's early reform decades, the political logic of China's reform trajectory revolved around gradual, segmented change that advanced the country's economic transformation while limiting political change. As part of this focus on global economic integration, foreign connections, language skills and networks "dramatically" increased in value (Zweig 2002: 58). In this period, in which differentiated and relatively decentralized regulation regimes played a key role, informal practices and institutions, including corruption, thrived in the pursuit of the central aim of rapid development (Ang 2020, Zhou 2022), while institutionalization and bureaucratic control lagged behind. The constant negotiation of state-society boundaries also led to "new kinds of openness", as different societal actors stretched ambiguous policies and grey zones each for their own purposes (e.g. Weller 2017: 283). Building on the limited policy literature on informal practices in immigration policymaking, this thesis finds that an understanding of informal policy shifts, and the way they interact with formal changes, is key to understanding the current immigration policymaking environment. The politics of international mobility, in which "the quadruple forces of globalization, marketization, decentralization and deregulation in the reform period" (Li 2008: 395) come together, is a key place to examine these changes.

c. Illuminating Xi-era policymaking through China's immigration politics

In this thesis, I take the immigration policy field as a case study of how key policy trends in the Xi Jinping era play out on the ground. Reading out the final report of the 20th Party Congress in 2022, party secretary Xi Jinping portrayed China as a country under threat from both domestic "deep-seated problems" regarding reform, development and stability as well as "external attempts to suppress and contain China" (CPC 2022). The report included 80 mentions of the term 'security', a near doubling from the two previous reports, signaling a shift in which the Chinese state is rebalancing its development-first strategy to promoting 'development and security in equal measure'. As Wang (2022) documents, this shift, motivated by a domestic economic slowdown and perceptions of a worsening external security environment, took place over a period of about five years, with central leadership fully committing to it in 2019, in the face of growing US-China tensions.

This shift has also been visible in the immigration policy field. While China's legal framework on immigration has always been restrictive, its overall approach was developmentalist. As Chou et al (2016: 216) note, unlike in the case of its large-scale internal migration, often viewed through a lens of societal risk, there has been "relatively little political discourse framing immigration as a security threat". In addressing the question how the prioritization of security concerns plays out in the immigration policy field, this thesis builds on research examining how Xi Jinping's leadership in the past decade has changed Chinese policymaking and the main processes through which it operates. While the reform era has been characterized by cycles of centralization and decentralization and intense negotiation across a fragmented policy system (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988), the last decade has seen a sustained centralization drive (Zhou 2023). Personalized leadership and 'top-level design', a key term that was popularized following the 18th Party Congress in 2012 to refer to the "clearer steering from above", are replacing the more bottom-up, incremental reform style that has been so crucial to China's reform trajectory (Ahlers and Schubert 2022: 13). These trends are reflected in the institutional landscape, with new central-level commissions, such as the National Security Commission and the Foreign Affairs Commission becoming key decision-making bodies (e.g. Zhao 2022).

In terms of implementation, campaign-style policy initiatives such as those fighting corruption and poverty have dominated, doubling as exercises in power-consolidation (Li 2019). Scholars of policy innovation have noted that the number of experimental policies, allowing localities to try out policies that might be adopted more broadly, have declined (Chen and Göbel 2016, Heilmann 2018, Teets and Hasmath 2020). Remaining pockets of policy experimentation are subject to stricter supervision by higher levels of government (Teets and Hasmath 2020, Yu and Huang 2019). Disciplinary pressure within the system has intensified, most notably through the more assertive role of Party organs vis-à-vis the state (Shen et al 2020). Amidst all this change, however, there has also been much continuity (Ahlers and Schubert 2022). My findings add to a conversation on how this centralization plays out on the ground, and how different actors respond to the changing pressures and incentives. In addition to an aversion of risk, in which officials afraid to make mistakes choose inaction or "seek instruction higher up on every last thing" (Snape 2019), I also examine how centralization leads to strategically selective implementation and thwarted state agendas.

This centralization drive has been reinforced by the fact that economic performance became a less reliable source of legitimacy following the global financial crisis, and so the Chinese leadership has turned to "the improvement of bureaucracy, propaganda, rule of law and promotion of equality" as new strategies for maintaining legitimacy (Zeng 2014: 615, Yang and Zhao 2015). As Naito notes, Xi's centralization of power has gone hand in hand with "developing a high-capacity bureaucracy that can do what he wants" (2020:4). This development comes in the context of a gradual expansion of

Chinese bureaucratic power since the mid-1990s (Zhao 2023: 312). Apart from the state's advances in digital governance, Xi-era bureaucratic reforms, from 'red-tape cutting' to professionalization of the party-state workforce, have not received much research attention. Certainly not 'liberalizing', these political reforms are perhaps best seen as an investment in state-building that sometimes aims to prop up public legitimacy by improving efficiency and transparency (e.g. Papagiannes 2021), while at other times its primary purpose is to enhance state control, such as for the expansion of surveillance capabilities (e.g. Byler 2022).

Finally, the increase in centralization and securitization also affects Chinese state-society relations and public sphere. Following a period of relative pluralism in the 1990s and early 2000s, Party leadership has aimed to bring all parts of society more firmly within the orbit of the state, aided by ideas about social management and governance (Pieke 2012, Teets 2014). With 'social governance' as the key framework for state-society relations in the Xi Jinping era, independent media, civil society and scholarly voices have been increasingly marginalized, and confined to ever smaller (online) spaces (Lei 2016). Popular nationalists have been relatively exempted from this development, due to their overall nationalistic agenda and commercial viability to media companies navigating censorship rules (Zhang et al 2018). As Schneider (2018) shows, with digital politics increasingly important, complex "negotiations, collaborations, and persuasions" (15) in the digital realm now govern relations between state and societal actors, including nationalist groups. While nationalists' role as a loud minority that can defend as well as pressure the state is not new (Lagerkvist 2004), recent research looks at a new generation of aggressive online nationalists that localize global 'alt-right' discourse, including on immigration (Yang and Fang 2021, C. Zhang 2020). The Chinese government has arguably taken a 'populist authoritarian' turn in its management of the nationalist public sphere, with public responsiveness becoming increasingly important (Tang 2018). However, how (online) public opinion affects specific policy processes has not been much studied, with the exception of foreign policy (e.g. Zhao 2013, Weiss 2014).

In this thesis, I add to these debates by studying the positions of local state actors, elite actors, online nationalists and a broader public in the development of China's immigration policy. My findings add up to a larger insight into the immigration policymaking sphere, in which wider changes in policymaking incentives create a securitizing, risk-averse policy environment with heightened barriers for reform.

d. Positioning China in global migration politics

The case of immigration politics in China, a developing illiberal country that is now also the world's second-largest economy and a global power, also has significant contributions to make to the wider field of migration politics. As Boucher and Gest point out in their typology of migration regimes, while China's immigration levels

are negligible compared to the size of its total population, the absolute number of immigrants is "substantial enough to merit the examination of China as a case and significantly greater than many countries currently the focus of immigration research" (2018: 25). This thesis explores how China's domestic political dynamics and national identity trajectory together shape the immigration system. In doing so, it highlights the complex role of state capacity in migration reform implementation, and that of elite and public discourse in shaping immigration policy. Its findings speak to debates on regional, global and illiberal migration politics in the larger on-going effort to theorize migration politics beyond Europe and North America (Natter 2018, Adamson and Tsourapas 2019, FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014, Klotz 2013, Chung 2020). In its priorities and drivers as well as its constraints, China's authoritarian immigration regime offers more points of comparison than might be expected based on existing literature in the migration politics field.

Regionally, China is part of East Asia, one of the major hubs of international migration and mobility worldwide. Compared to other global regions, migration within Asia is characterized by an active role of the state and relatively rigid employer-based migration systems that often require a labor contract before entry (Battistella 2014). Levels of temporary, circulatory and return migration are high, while levels of migrant settlement tend to be low (Xiang et al 2013, Saxenian 2000). Japan and South Korea's immigration regimes have received much research attention, defying expectations within the field that high-income democracies would inevitably liberalize migration control. Scholarship on this issue has often been dominated by research on the influence of cultural determinants such as exclusionary 'ethnic' citizenship (e.g. Castles and Miller 2009). Others, however, highlight the importance of political and economic factors leading to divergent migration and citizenship policies over time, also with regard to co-ethnic migrants (e.g. Choe 2006, Seol and Skrentny 2009). Chung (2021), for instance, shows how Japan and Korea have designed multi-tier immigration system that have "institutionalized noncitizen hierarchies" (13), to manage economic migration in a way that serves the labor market without leading to widespread immigrant incorporation. As an East Asian developmental state that is not bound by democratic or liberal immigration norms, the Chinese case, which so far largely follows a similar pattern of a selective immigration framework with strict limits on settlement, can provide insight into these regional patterns.

Beyond East Asia, as a developing, authoritarian state, the Chinese case can contribute to a growing literature that challenges assumptions about the relationship between migration systems, developmental trajectories and political regimes. First, it helps expand knowledge on global variation in state migration management. As Adamson and Tsourapas (2019) have argued, such an effort is necessary, given that analysis of the 'migration state' (Hollifield 2004) as a key concept in the study of migration politics had in fact been limited to that of the 'Western liberal migration state'.

Second, it focuses on immigration reception dynamics, which remain understudied outside Western contexts, despite most migration taking place within the so-called Global South (Nawyn 2016, Norman 2020). Studying immigrant reception in countries with different political regimes and developmental contexts opens up the comparison of different migration policy factors, from domestic politics to foreign diplomacy and state-society relations (Natter and Thiollet 2022). Existing studies of migration management in other major authoritarian states, such as Russia and Saudi-Arabia, show great potential for comparative study of issues like the politicization and the role of the public in authoritarian migration management, who have been assumed to be insulated from public pressures (Schenk 2018, Thiollet 2021, Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke 2012). The relationship between development, state modernization and immigration politics I identify in the Chinese case can also generate hypotheses for immigration policy drivers in other rapidly-developing contexts, as it defies usual distinctions between 'Global North' and 'Global South' migration dynamics.

Finally, the Chinese case adds evidence to analyses of global trends in immigration policymaking, also outside of 'Global South' or 'authoritarian' contexts. As the Chinese state builds a more comprehensive framework for immigration management, it is clear that its policies are developing in line with global trends of increasing selectiveness, and make use of globally prevalent policy tools (Haas et al 2016). 'Talent visa', permanent residency options and integration services aim to attract and retain 'desirable' skilled migrants, while other economic migrants are kept increasingly 'temporary' as a way to balance development and security concerns. These reforms come in a context of very few settlement options, leading Boucher and Gest (2018) to categorize China as a 'quasi Kafala' immigration regime, referring to the restrictive migration management in Gulf countries, but with lower immigrant flows.

However, such quantitative macro-analyses of global migration regimes have been unable to explain why China's concrete articulations of global trends in immigration policymaking take such a conservative shape. They also tend not to consider policy implementation, and the gaps between policies on paper and their enforcement. This study, examining the politics of immigration policymaking in China, contributes to work that looks at how global diffusion interacts with national policy contexts beyond formal policy frameworks. I show how the development and implementation of China's immigration policy is shaped by domestic politics – institutional relations, state capacity, migration policy legacies and informal governance practices – as well as what Boswell calls an 'ideology of migration' or the "patterns of political and social thought which shape thinking on a range of questions linked to migration, such as concepts of citizenship and belonging, rights and responsibilities of members, and obligations towards non-members" (Boswell 2003: 6).

4. Methodology

This project departs from an area studies approach that takes 'China as method' (Yuzo [1989] 2016), centering and examining a variety of Chinese points of view. It is dedicated to a deeper understanding of the Chinese particulars – the what, how, why – of its immigration politics. This focus on Chinese immigration politics and its theorization is essential to integrating and furthering knowledge on how the world's foremost emerging power deals with immigration, one of the key issues of our time. Methodological nationalism, or a territorialized, narrow analytical focus "obsessed with describing processes within nation-state boundaries as contrasted with those outside" (Wimmer and Schiller 2002: 307), remains common within the migration politics field. However, while national case studies run the risk of reifying national boundaries, when it comes to previously ignored country cases, building up a knowledge base of immigration politics at the national level in fact opens up the possibility of cross-border comparison. In this sense, such case studies also form a foundational step for the field in correcting its Euro-American bias. While in-depth comparison goes beyond the scope of this thesis, throughout this research I point to ways in which the Chinese case relates to regional and global trends in migration politics. More broadly, this thesis aims to avoid China exceptionalism, instead viewing in-depth study of the Chinese context as instrumental to understanding its position in the world, or the ways China is embedded within, reflective of, and shaping broader global trends (Franceschini and Loubere 2022: 6).

In this thesis, 'China' refers to 'mainland China,' centering its domestic authoritarian political system, and not to other political regimes that can be called Chinese due to their position within P.R.C. governance (Hong Kong and Macao) or other parts of the Sinophone world. Similarly, its analysis is limited to the immigrants that are considered 'third-country' foreign nationals by the Chinese state. In some official statistics, this group is combined with migrants coming to mainland China from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan into a category named 'international residents.' However, the P.R.C. state's treatment of Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan citizens, who it aims to integrate into mainland society (Tseng and Wu 2011, Rowen 2023), and of other immigrants, are increasingly diverging. While the politics surrounding all these migrants deserves further attention, for this reason my project limits itself to policymaking directed at 'third-country' immigrants.

a. Data collection

This project draws from qualitative traditions in area studies, political science and sociology and contributes to a larger trend in the study of migration policymaking towards the use of more ethnographic methods (Favell 2021). As methods involving "direct and sustained social contact" with research participants, ethnographic participant-observation and in-depth interviews are well-suited to studying different

layers of policy-making and the gaps between them, from policy discourse to policy development and implementation (Willis and Trondman 2000: 1, FitzGerald 2006, Schoenhals 1992, Snape 2020).

The study is primarily based on a body of over 100 interviews with relevant Chinese stakeholders, collected in mainland China between September 2018 and October 2020. First, I conducted 20 interviews and participant observation among immigration policy makers in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangxi (Nanning and two border cities). This included officials at the NIA, the exit-entry administration, foreign experts bureau, talent attraction bureau, commerce department, and the human resources and social security department. In Beijing and Shanghai, I also attended over a dozen government-organized immigration policy promotion events and training sessions. In Guangxi I joined local government inspections. Due to the tightening research environment, my access at the national level was limited. I compensated by interviewing more experts consulting on national-level policy development.

Second, I conducted 27 expert interviews with researchers of immigration to China and its governance, focused on their views of and involvement in policy-making processes. I also attended public and semi-public immigration conferences and events, which in China often bring together government representatives and researchers and are suited to observing agenda setting in the policy debate (Zhu 2011). In addition, I also interviewed 11 commercial migration intermediaries, 5 employers of foreign migrants, and 6 'expert migrants', who had in-depth experience with one or more of the policies discussed.

Lastly, I draw on 46 semi-structured interviews with a diverse sample of Chinese individuals, conducted in three locations with different levels of immigration (Shanghai, Jinan and Pinghu, Zhejiang). Respondents were selected based on age group, gender, education level and migration status (local resident or internal migrant). Interviews focused on personal experiences with immigrants, beliefs and opinions on the effects of immigration, immigrant treatment, and immigration control. To chart how my foreign nationality affected responses, half of these interviews were completed by three Chinese research assistants. However, as is detailed in chapter 4, no significant difference in responses was found, perhaps reflecting the relatively low levels of politicization around white female migrants like myself, or respondents' awareness of being part of a foreign national's research project, regardless of the identity of the interviewer.

In line with fieldwork conventions in authoritarian field sites, in which written informed consent forms can be associated with distrust and risk, I relied on oral informed consent (Glasius et al. 2018: 100). All interviews with members of the public, but not all expert interviews were recorded, in line with interviewees' personal preferences. All recorded interviews were transcribed and anonymized, with audio and written data saved in an online protected data repository. For non-recorded expert interviews, I took extensive

notes, which I transcribed on the same day. All interviews were anonymized – in line with previous findings in the Chinese academic field, anonymity has become the norm for any research participation (2018: 101). All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, with the exception of several public interviews in which the interviewee preferred English.

Throughout the chapters, I reference interviews using a number code that specifies the location of the interview, the category of respondent, and the month in which the interview took place. The respondent categories are: government or Party official (O), researcher (R), intermediary (I), employer (E), migrant (M), or member of the public (P). The location indicators are Shanghai (S), Guangxi (G) and 'national' (N), referring to interviews with officials and researchers that took place outside Shanghai and Guangxi. Most of these interviews took place in Beijing and Guangzhou. For example, the code (S-O3, 9/2019) refers to interview 3 with a government official ('O') in Shanghai that took place in September, 2019.

In addition to these interviews, I use original survey data on Chinese immigration attitudes, collected in July 2020. As part of a team at East China Science and Technology University, I contributed to the design and implementation of this pioneering online national survey on immigration policy. The non-representative nationwide sample (N = 1888) was stratified by age group, gender and educational level, and captures a diverse national population on key variables like age, gender, social class and international exposure (for more information on the sample and geographical distribution of completed questionnaires, see chapter 6). I also include previously unexamined data on Chinese immigration attitudes from the World Values Survey (Waves 2-7) and the Asian Barometer Survey (Wave 4), which have included occasional questions on immigration in their China survey.

Finally, I contextualize my fieldwork findings with policy and media analysis. To this end, I collected and analyzed policy information and government discourse by state actors, with a focus on the NIA, exit-entry authorities, and employment authorities, tracking the websites, social media and state media coverage of relevant departments for the 2018-2022 period. In addition, I compiled a body of policy analysis of over 250 articles and books, produced by researchers and practitioners within public security and other departments, as well as independent experts, going back to the late 1980s. For my case study on the 2020 permanent residency reforms, I also analyzed expert and (social) media discourse on that issue (see Chapter 6). These textual materials allowed me to triangulate and contextualize information obtained in the interviews. As Shi (2015) points out, employing data from multiple sources is especially advisable for researching difficult to access authoritarian regimes.

I adopted an "iterative analytical process" of moving between interview and survey data, other textual sources, and relevant theory, that allowed me to stay attuned to new developments and update my research process accordingly (Bretell 2022: 196,

Glick Schiller 2003). For instance, as the emerging politicization of skilled migration became more apparent in early 2020, following online media debate on the proposed permanent residency regulations, I decided to include related questions in my public interviews and remaining expert interviews, leading to my fifth case study. More detail on the methodologies of each of the sub-projects is provided in the case study chapters.

b. Fieldwork conditions

The conditions for conducting this fieldwork changed considerably in the course of this project and reflect the shrinking opportunities for foreign social science researchers working in China. First, while navigating the shifting boundaries of China's authoritarian state apparatus has been a constant concern for researchers conducting fieldwork, Chinese and foreign alike, the space for doing fieldwork has narrowed in the last decade as more topics are considered off limits and state surveillance over academic research has tightened (Thogerson and Heimer 2006, Harlan 2019). Foreign researchers have been relatively protected from state persecution by their nationality, but their research projects and domestic collaborators can face high levels of scrutiny by state actors or the hosting institution, due to vigilance against what state propaganda refers to as 'hostile foreign forces' and growing risk around research that is deemed politically sensitive to authorities. Access to the Chinese Party-state, especially, has declined. While in previous decades, some regime insiders chose to provide ethnographic access to foreign researchers and journalists (see for instance Kennedy 2008, Pieke 2009, Shirk 1993, Shirk 2007), the tightening of inter-Party discipline and repoliticization of foreign ties has heightened the threshold for officials to participate in academic research.

Second, the Covid-19 pandemic decreased opportunities for engagement in 2020. Officials who had been willing to meet in person were not available for online interactions, perhaps wary of leaving a record in China's online surveillance system. In addition, the crisis atmosphere around pandemic control activated a heightened level of political sensitivity around 'foreignness' within the Chinese political system. This institutionalized caution persisted after the initial societal fear of immigrants spreading the virus, that like elsewhere in China took the shape of discrimination and racism against migrants during the first Covid-19 wave in spring 2020. In October 2020, for instance, I was refused attendance at a key conference on immigration governance at a research institution that is part of the public security apparatus. "Someone like you will understand how things work here," the organizer told me apologetically.

While these developments deeply impacted my research, they were somewhat offset by the fact that the start of my fieldwork period in 2018 coincided with a window of opportunity for studying the Chinese immigration state. As I elaborate in chapter 2, a momentum in the immigration policy sphere starting in 2015/6, primarily sparked by a top-down mandate for improving China's skilled migration attraction, extended to the

academic study of immigration. Due to its embeddedness in the public security system, the lack of public data and access to the immigration system has arguably been the main obstacle facing the field (Liu 2015, Liang and Wang 2021). In the late 2010s, however, state representatives frequented immigration conferences, started releasing more public information (from a low base), and became more open to academic collaborations. New annual conferences and immigration research centers were established, and for the first time key national calls for research funding included immigration issues in their topic lists. While this trend has faced headwinds from the pandemic, as well as from the emerging politicization of immigration (see chapter 6), the research infrastructure and networking opportunities of these years has greatly benefited this research, in the form of interview connections, online community and resource sharing among China-focused migration, as well as the collaboration with migration sociologists at East China University of Science and Technology resulting in the online survey that informs chapter 5 and 6 of this thesis.

My identity as a white foreign researcher from a European university also shaped many aspects of this fieldwork, in more and less conscious ways. As a long-term migrant to China, I had personally experienced changes in Chinese policymaking as well as in public perceptions of migrants like myself. This prompted my initial interest in designing a study focused on the understudied 'Chinese side' of these debates, as part of the wider transnational research project 'Immigration and the Transformation of Chinese Society'. In the course of this research, I experienced the mix of privilege and precarity that a migrant with my background encounters in China today (Lan 2021, Camenisch 2022). In terms of access, it was my domestic affiliation to a well-known Chinese university that opened some doors (or ended late-night border checkpoint interrogations), while my foreignness tended to initially be viewed as a barrier or liability.

Once an interview took place, respondents tended to express interest in my views both as a foreign migrant and as a researcher of migration. Such "reverse interviews" (Glasius et al 2018: 61) on immigration policy in other parts of the world, and on sentiments among China's foreign community were common in all my interviews. However, they were especially prominent in interviews with officials, perhaps reflecting the limited information sharing and feedback mechanisms between state actors and immigrant communities (see chapter 6). During these conversations, I was often addressed as a foreign representative, but as a white female Mandarin-speaking migrant, I faced little hostility. This position of privilege became especially apparent when respondents would discuss other foreigners that were considered less welcome, sometimes in racist terms. However, despite respondents' candor it would be a mistake to assume I was able to access some 'foreign-neutral' position that did not deeply influence the social interactions in this research.

c. Terminology

Some important final notes on terminology: first, my choice to refer to foreign nationals residing in China as 'immigrants', following convention in the immigration research field, does not intend to bypass debate on the meaning of immigration in the Chinese context. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 2, emerging state usage of the term 'immigration' has so far mostly been limited to refer to 'immigration' at large, rather than to individual 'immigrants', for whom 'foreigner' remains the standard term.[9] Relatedly, chapter 5 includes information on societal terms for foreign migrants, while chapter 6 discusses Chinese perceptions of foreigners' permanent residency. I also return to the issue of terminology in debate on foreigners' belonging in the conclusion. The fact that the most common Chinese-language use for the word '移民' refers to emigrating or Chinese emigrants abroad, rather than to immigration or foreign nationals in China, is an indication of the relative marginality of immigrants in Chinese society, as well as of a continued self-understanding of China as first and foremost a country of emigration (see Natter 2023:14 for another example of this). To avoid confusion, in interview questions and in our survey, we therefore primarily spoke of 'foreigners living in China' (e.g. 居住中国的外国人) rather than of 'immigrants'.[10]

Second, while the survey contained more detailed questions on attitudes towards migrants from different geographical and ethnic backgrounds, in my interviews I asked open questions about 'foreigners'. This choice allowed respondents to freely interpret the question and provided space for bottom-up categorizations. In response, many of my respondents demonstrated nuanced understandings of the diverse identities of foreign migrants in China, which have not fully been captured by a field that has especially focused on Chinese interactions with foreigners racialized as black and white. While future study refining an understanding of Chinese attitudes towards different immigrant groups remain needed, the public views of immigration and related policies captured in this thesis provide important evidence on how China-

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9 While 'foreigner' is the most common term for foreign nationals in immigration policy and legislation, a wide variety of other terms are used by state actors to refer to foreign nationals in the country. These include among others: 'foreign resident population' (外国常住人口), 'population of foreign nationals' (外籍人口), 'foreign floating population' (外籍流动人口), used in statistical analysis; 'foreign friends' (外国朋友) and 'foreign guests' (外国嘉宾), in the context of more informal state discourse and state propaganda, 'foreign ethnic Chinese' (外籍华人), which administratively refers to foreign nationals who used to have a P.R.C. passport but is also informally also used to refer to ethnic Chinese more broadly, and so on. The term 'three illegals foreigners' '三非外国人' as a shorthand for foreign nationals that irregularly enter, reside or work in China has also been adopted by public security authorities. For more detail on some of these terms, see Pieke (2011: 44-45), Liu (2018), Plummer (2020). In Chinese-language scholarship, 'foreigners in China' (在华外国人) is common, but so are 'international migrants' (国际移民) and 'cross-border population' (跨境人口), which in the context of these studies refer to foreign nationals living in China.

10 And other related terms, such as 'foreigners coming to live and work in China' (来中国生活工作的外国) and 'foreigners settled in China' (定居在中国的外国人).

foreign conceptualizations, which have been central to Chinese national identity narratives, are changing. In the conclusion, I identify future research avenues that can integrate these findings with existing research on Chinese subcategorizations of foreign migrants on the basis of racialization, ethnicity or nationality.

Finally, in its focus on state policymaking processes across several types of migration, this thesis includes a lot of migration policy language. From the way migrants are categorized as 'low' or 'high' skilled, to terms like immigration 'management' and 'control' or immigrant 'integration', usage of these terms risks naturalizing or even endorsing these categories and the view of immigration underlying them. While I do not always have space in this paper-based thesis to include critical reflection on the policy agendas discussed, I would like to note that, like elsewhere, in China migration management language is used in a technocratic manner that obscures the neoliberal values of economic maximalization these categories derive from (Geiger and Pecoud 2010). At the same time, while bureaucratic language depoliticizes migration in Euro-American contexts, in China's authoritarian system, without a clear separation between political power and public administration, "the bureaucracy is political" (Ang 2018: 2). The explicit developmental aims of China's immigration policy, which have been shaped around a 'catching up' modernization narrative, also highlight the deeply unequal global context that underpins current migration systems (Castles 2004). In that sense, I hope this analysis of Chinese policy aims and processes does provide some opportunity for critical reflection into the inherently political nature of all migration decision-making

5. Synopsis

This dissertation follows an article-based format. Apart from this introduction and a concluding final chapter, it consists of five substantive chapters, each in the format of a journal article. So far, three of these articles have been published in peer-reviewed area studies journals (they are reproduced here in largely unaltered form),[11] while one of the remaining two is under review and one will soon be submitted.

Chapter 2 (published in *China Perspectives*) discusses national-level institutional reform of immigration policy, focusing on the establishment of the National Immigration Administration (NIA) in 2018, which was considered a breakthrough in the Chinese state's governance of immigration. Drawing on interviews with immigration officials and experts and on policy documents, I trace the top-down reform to the central state's talent attraction agenda and global governance ambitions, and analyze the change and continuity in the first years of operation. I show how the NIA brought momentum and resources to immigration reform, introducing a more comprehensive state

11 Most edits in the previously published articles pertain to formatting. In a few cases, phrasing and sourcing have been adjusted for coherence and accuracy.

discourse and communication strategy that included an emerging official recognition of China's identity as an immigration destination country and a speeding up of legal reform in several areas, such as skilled migration management and border security. At the same time, the NIA's relatively low sub-ministerial ranking (under the Ministry of Public Security) made it difficult for the agency to take up its role as the main coordinator of China's fragmented immigration landscape. In this chapter, I argue that the new agency's mandate for a more professionalized immigration system brings key governance principles from the Xi era to the issue of immigration governance: As China's first national immigration agency, the NIA reflects a top-down vision to strengthen centralized command and the legal encoding of national interests, as well as China's international position with regard to migration governance. However, the agency's domestic political challenges – from bureaucratic resistance to a lack of consensus on strategy – also reflect broader, systemic issues in recent institutional reforms.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine two complementing case studies of local-level policy experimentation in the management of economic migration. Chapter 3 analyzes the selective implementation of Shanghai's 'new talent regime', a set of experimental policies focused on improving skilled migrant attraction, retention and integration. As part of a geopolitical competition for talent, China is often portrayed as especially proactive in its state efforts to attract skilled migrants from around the world. Shanghai, China's most international city, has been at the forefront of the country's efforts to attract skilled migrants from around the world, and to expand its immigration system to meet the needs of long-term incoming and return migrants. However, despite a strong mandate for reform, my fieldwork and policy analysis finds that while Shanghai has built an ambitious skilled migration program on paper, the extent of its implementation has been mixed. Enquiring into this implementation gap, I find that state actors differentiate between policies deemed in line with longstanding policy goals, which they implement proactively, and more innovative policies, which they implement mainly on a performative level. I argue that this risk-averse policy implementation can be traced to the centralization of policymaking under president Xi Jinping, disincentivizing policy experimentation, and an emerging (re-)politicization of immigration policy in China at a time of increased nationalism in the public sphere. Skilled migration policy, pertaining to perhaps the least controversial and most desirable migrant flow, has often been considered a primarily technocratic migration policy field with low levels of politicization. However, the case of Shanghai's skilled migrant policy implementation demonstrates the importance of considering the range of domestic political factors that can inform local state actors' motivations and barriers for implementing these globally popular policies.

Chapter 4 (published in *China Information*) investigates a policy trial to regularize cross-border labor migration in two Guangxi border cities, where Vietnamese migrant

workers alleviated a regional labor shortage. China faces a shrinking labor supply and rapidly ageing society, but – in a country that has long defined itself by its large population - there is little policy debate on filling labor shortages by recruiting more foreign workers, who generally need to have higher education and work experience to qualify for a work permit. China's underdeveloped border regions, where labor shortages have been acute and large numbers of foreign migrants work irregularly in factories and other sectors, have been at the forefront of this debate. The Guangxi trial acknowledges foreigners' role in the low-income segment of the Chinese labor market, while also reflecting state concern with irregular migration. Based on fieldwork and policy research, the chapter analyzes how local state actors balance conflicting development and security aims in the design and early implementation of this trial. It shows how local officials successfully framed their bottom-up demands for expanding Vietnamese labor mobility in the context of China's national strategy for border development. However, during implementation, local state actors were met with central demands to further control irregular migration, leading to a securitized trial that restricted migrant stay duration and location of stay, and disrupted circular labor migration flows. Situating the regularization trial within China's wider immigration reforms, the Guangxi case demonstrates the shift from primarily developmentalist to security-oriented policy. While some central state actors show a willingness to innovate in a sensitive policy area, a risk-averse policy environment makes policy innovation more difficult. Together, chapters 3 and 4, demonstrate the breadth of on-going policy innovation but also reflect bureaucratic bottlenecks and an overall risk-averse trend in policy reform in the Xi Jinping era (Teets et al 2017).

Finally, in chapters 5 and 6, I examine societal aspects of China's immigration reforms, which my thesis argues are an increasingly relevant factor in immigration policy-making. Chapter 5 discusses public attitudes on immigration, asking how a broad cross-section of Chinese individuals experience the increase in immigration in the last decades, and how their views on immigration policy issues have developed. Combining semi-structured interviews and original survey analysis, I find that in explaining their views on immigration, Chinese respondents mobilize a broadly shared frame of reference centered on the state of the nation, which emphasizes China's developmental trajectory – a rapid transition from poor and semi-colonized to emerging global power. Drawing on perceptions of immigration control in Global North countries, as well as on China's internal migration control practices, respondents describe how they consider the country increasingly attractive to immigrants but also more capable of integrating and controlling them. They describe a shift from viewing immigration as a necessary and largely beneficial aspect of the early phase of China's modernization, towards a multi-dimensional and more contested issue. While the salience of immigration seems to be increasing, especially among highly educated groups, overall, I find that moderate views occupy most of the spectrum of Chinese immigration attitudes. This forms an

important complement to existing studies focusing on online highly critical anti-immigration discourse. The connection Chinese respondents draw between immigration attitudes and perceptions of a nation's developmental status has wider significance for the study of immigrant reception in large parts of the non-Western world where national identity narratives feature a 'catching up' modernization logic (Tlostanova 2012).

Chapter 6 (published in *Journal of Contemporary China*) explores the emerging politicization of immigration policy in Chinese society through the case of a draft law on foreigners' permanent residency, which was published for public comment in February 2020. The release of the law, a long-delayed reform that would widen access to permanent residency for some high-income immigrants, triggered an unprecedented debate on the social impact of immigration and billions of largely negative online comments. Authorities responded by shelving the bill. Analyzing official, expert and popular discourse on the draft law before, during, and after the controversy, the chapter asks what factors contributed to this miscalculation of public sentiment, and what the permanent residency debate can tell us about the role of public opinion in Chinese policymaking today. It shows how 'ultranationalist' commentators, who have grown interested in the issue of immigration as part of their affinity with global 'alt right' populist trends, quickly dominated and politicized public debate on foreigners' permanent residency, in a wider context of opaque policymaking, deepening censorship, and low levels of public knowledge on immigration policy.

While I find that public attitudes towards immigrant permanent residency are in fact more nuanced than nationalist-dominated online debate suggests, the negative sentiment expressed in the permanent residency debate has been taken by elites as an important or even representative part of Chinese public opinion on immigration, stalling reforms and leading to a politicization of immigration policy that in turn constrains the space for research and policy consultation. This process highlights the relevance of public opinion to China's non-democratic immigration policymaking as well as an information gap on immigration between policy elites and the public. Finally, the permanent residency debate also opens up a comparative angle, as Chinese immigration policymaking seems to be undergoing a trajectory of gradual politicization similar to other early-stage immigrant-reception contexts. Together, chapter 5 and 6 provide insight into the rising importance and diversity of societal attitudes in Chinese immigration policy-making, complementing and challenging previous studies on these issues.

The concluding Chapter 7 synthesizes my findings and lays out the contributions of the thesis to the study of Chinese (im)migration and internationalization, Chinese policymaking and the wider field of migration politics. It also discusses some implications of my findings for public and policy debate on immigration to China and the country's global rise.