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## **Beyond friends and foes: immigration policymaking in contemporary China**

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# Immigration attitudes, national identity and development in mainland China<sup>87</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Following decades of nation-building accompanied by limited immigration, China's immigration policy changed radically in its reform era starting in the 1980s, when immigrants were welcomed as harbingers of economic development and cosmopolitanism. Their inflow was gradual and limited relative to China's population, but since the 2000s, increasing immigrant numbers in China's big urban centers, industrial hubs and border areas have established it as an emerging destination country (Pieke 2011). China's 2020 national census counted 850,000 foreign residents, a diverse population of professionals, students, traders, spouses, border residents, and other migrants. This paper investigates how Chinese citizens experience the increase in immigrants in China and what their policy priorities towards immigration are. It asks: How do Chinese citizens view the role of immigration in their society as China transforms into a global power – and an emerging immigrant country?

Studies of Chinese immigration attitudes have focused on public controversies around immigration, such as the largely negative social media response to the growth of African trader communities in southern China in the 2000s, or the question of whether China should adopt a more open refugee policy (e.g. Gan 2020). Critical online discussion on immigration has attracted research into the (political) structures of racist attitudes in China and the transnational connections of such debates (Cheng 2019, Zhang 2019). Scholars have also explored local-migrant relations in localities with relatively large immigrant populations, such as the cities of Guangzhou and Yiwu. These studies showcase that, even in the context of highly racialized discourse around

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Black immigrants, a variety of Chinese attitudes towards these immigrants and their impact on local society exist (e.g. Lan 2016, Zhou et al 2016).

However, there has been little research on Chinese opinions of immigration outside specific online or offline communities, or at a national level. There are also few studies of Chinese attitudes towards immigration policies. An exception is Han (2017a), who, based on national survey data from 2008, finds that 43.4% of respondents support an increase in economic immigrant numbers, without significant differences between attitudes nationwide and those in China's largest cities (vs. 25.2% supporting a decrease, and 31.3% in favor of maintaining the status quo). However, more recent data on national immigration attitudes have not been published, and there have been no qualitative accounts that can provide more in-depth insight into societal attitudes and policy priorities on immigration.

Based on 46 interviews with a diverse group of respondents, as well as a national online survey (N=1888), this study explores how members of the Chinese public present their opinions on issues of immigrant membership, selection and control, providing insight into ways individuals make sense of immigration outside the context of specific controversies. Drawing on literature on immigrant reception, this paper analyses such immigration attitudes in the context of China's developmental trajectory and narratives of national identity. The paper finds that respondents with moderate views occupy most of the spectrum of Chinese immigration attitudes and that, like in many other countries, Chinese respondents emphasize ideas about their nation in their views on immigrants and immigration policy. In particular, respondents systematically connect China's developmental success to immigration policy goals and outcomes. This connection 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).

## **2. Contextualizing China in the broader debate on immigrant reception**

A large body of interdisciplinary literature has focused on native attitudes towards immigrants in migrant-receiving societies. A key finding of this scholarship has been that ideas about the 'state of the nation' and host society identity have greater explanatory power than factors related to natives' individual interests (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). While most of this research has been done in Euro-American contexts, recent studies in Asian developmental states have confirmed and expanded these insights (e.g. Denney and Green 2021).

There has also been an effort to broaden the scope of research to the entire spectrum of attitudes towards immigration that exist among populations. For decades, research has focused largely on anti-immigration attitudes, mostly studied in Western contexts (Freeman 1995, Lucassen 2018). By comparison, moderate, neutral or positive views

on immigration have gone understudied, despite the fact that in most of these countries a majority of the population reports feeling ambivalent or unsure about immigrants (Dempster et al. 2020: 19). In general, immigration attitudes have been studied much less in Global South countries, although many developing countries have seen growing immigration in recent decades (Gisselquist and Tarp 2019).

While the immigration attitudes literature has been largely quantitative, focused on factors predicting anti-immigrant sentiment, much less is known about how people frame or explain their views on immigration (Parks-Yancy et al. 2009: 286). As Waldinger puts it, describing the field in the United States, the research focus has been on “them, not us” (2018: 1413). This has also been true for studies outside Western contexts. For instance, critical ‘expat’ literature in post-colonial developing societies in the Global South importantly shows the “problematic reproductions of the colonial past” at work in the reception of migrants from Western backgrounds. However, these studies usually center migrant experience rather than the societies receiving them (Fechter and Walsh 2010).

A limited number of in-depth qualitative studies of host society understandings of immigration (the ‘us’) confirm that individuals often hold views that are more neutral, ambivalent and flexible than political or media discourse suggests. Using thematic and linguistic analysis, interview-based studies on immigration attitudes highlight the connections individuals make between their views on immigration and beliefs they hold about national identity and development (Parks-Yancy et al. 2009, Strauss 2011). Qualitative studies outside Euro-American contexts contribute to our limited understanding of the social incorporation of immigrants and host society responses in Global South countries, showing how debates on specific immigration policies are shaped by unique national circumstance, even when patterns seem similar. For instance, Japan’s anti-immigrant sentiment is largely rooted in controversy over the incomplete social incorporation of ethnic minority groups, most notably the Korean population that stayed in Japan post-WW2, and not a backlash against open immigration policies (e.g. Chung 2019: 220-221).

The case of China, a developing country that is now also the world’s second-largest economy, is well-suited to exploring diverse responses to immigrant reception. Like in many other young nation-states with histories of Western imperialist interference, international migration was seen as a threat to independence in the first decades following the PRC’s establishment. From the 1980s onwards, the Chinese state started to embrace the “capabilities-enhancing potential” of migration (de Haas 2010, 256). Large-scale internal and outward migration ensued. Despite many not returning, China entered a positive cycle of what de Haas describes as the “mutually reinforcing interactions between migration and development” (de Haas 2010, 256) that can occur when migrants contribute to take-off development. Emigrants, especially, were celebrated as participants in the national modernization project, in what formed a sharp

break with the allegations of disloyalty they had faced during the Cultural Revolution (Nyiri 2006, Thuno 2001).

While small in scale by comparison, immigration became part of China's new relationship to mobility, with immigration liberalization directly linked to China's increasing economic global integration. Although structural reforms of the immigration system have been limited – with permanent settlement options largely absent – in the 2000s a developmentally oriented, pragmatically enforced immigration regime emerged (Pieke 2011). China's immigration authorities, part of the country's opaque public security system, do not regularly publish data on the number of foreigners residing in China, making precise trends in incoming migration difficult to track.

However, fragmented data sources show that foreign communities grew by over 10% annually in the 2000s, with growth slowing down in the 2010s (Yang 2012). Annual registered border crossings by foreign nationals surged from 16,7 million in 1999 to 97,7 million in 2019. According to national census figures, which first included foreign residents in 2010, key migrant origin areas are East Asia, South-east Asia and North America (see Table A.4.1 in Annex 4). China's immigration policy framework focuses on professional migration that could support its modernization, with labor migration almost completely restricted. However, irregular migrant labor flows are common in some (border) areas. In addition, China now attracts a significant foreign student population, hosting over 492,000 foreign students in 2018 (up from 141,087 in 2005), almost 60% of which come from Asian countries.<sup>88</sup>

Given the importance of national identity perceptions and developmental trajectories for immigration attitudes, as well as the strong connection between mobility and development in China's reform era, I expect that Chinese immigration attitudes are undergoing significant change in the context of China's rapid socio-economic transformation in recent decades. In particular, the uneven internationalization of Chinese society, as well as China's emphasis on independence from foreign influence in its national identity narrative suggests that immigration will be perceived more ambivalently compared to the celebration of reform era emigration.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper draws on a combination of qualitative interviews and quantitative data on Chinese immigration attitudes. The qualitative data aims to deepen understanding of how Chinese respondents interpret, answer, and frame key questions on the role of immigration in society. For this paper, 46 semi-structured interviews were conducted

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88 教育部 (Ministry of Education, “2018年来华留学统计” [2018 foreign student statistics], April 12, 2019, [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/gzdt\\_gzdt/s5987/201904/t20190412\\_377692](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/gzdt_gzdt/s5987/201904/t20190412_377692)).

between June and October 2020 (20 by author, 26 by three research assistants).<sup>89</sup> Interviews lasted on average 30-60 minutes and explored personal experiences with immigrants, beliefs and opinions on the effects of immigration (both at a local and at a national level), immigrant treatment, and immigration control.

The interviews were done in three locations: Shanghai, the mega-city with China's largest foreign population (roughly 1% of the 25 million inhabitants are of foreign nationality), Pinghu, an industrial town in Zhejiang province with a history of attracting foreign investment, and Jinan, the provincial capital of Shandong province, with little immigration and a more conservative ideological profile. Respondents were selected with an aim for diversity in terms of age, gender, education level and personal migration status (local or internal migrant) (see Annex 3, Table A.3.1). They were found through the personal networks of the author and research assistants, or through chance encounters. With the exception of one ethnic Hui respondent, the respondents were members of the country's Han-Chinese majority (91.1% of the population in the 2020 census). Interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author and the research assistants. The author analyzed the transcripts using manual coding for common and distinct themes, as well as speech patterns.<sup>90</sup>

While limited in its scale and statistical representativeness, the interview sample reflects a broad cross-section of Chinese society and its vast socio-economic spectrum and thus complements analyses of online debates on immigration, which tend to amplify the strongest views as well as those of university-educated, urban and male internet users (Dempster et al. 2020: 26). Self-censorship of less socially acceptable opinions cannot be excluded, but by working with three research assistants who were Chinese nationals it was possible to check for variation in responses given to a foreign researcher and to a fellow national. No major differences were found, except in the terms used to describe immigrants.<sup>91</sup> Interview questions did not use the term for 'immigrant' and 'immigration' (移民), but terms like 'foreigner', 'foreigner who lives in China' and 'long-term settlement' (定居), which are more familiar in the Chinese context. While 'immigration' in the sense of permanent settlement is unusual given China's incomplete immigration policy framework, in this article I do use 'immigrant' and 'immigration' to refer to foreign nationals residing in China and their act of moving there, following academic convention and definitions of international organizations.

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89 As they all took place between June-October 2020, for the public interviews referenced in this chapter, I do not include the exact month in the interview code. I also do not specify the location, although more information on the respondent and their place of residency is often mentioned in the running text.

90 The interview data were anonymized at all stages of the research and saved in an institutional data repository. It complies with institutional requirements for approval at the time of the study's commencement. Participants were fully informed of the study's affiliation and purposes and oral consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview.

91 See section 4.b for more analysis on this point.

I compare and contrast these interview data with data from an online survey on immigration attitudes I designed and administered in July 2020 as part of a research team at East China University of Science and Technology. It contained detailed questions on immigration policy and salience that had previously not been asked in a Chinese context, such as attitudes towards immigrants of various skill levels, and on current levels of immigration management. The non-representative nationwide sample (N=1888) was stratified by age group, gender and educational level, with student assistants monitoring survey completion, improving the rate of completed surveys (94%) and data reliability. While the resulting sample, like many online surveys, has a bias towards higher levels of education, it captures a diverse national population on variables like age, gender, social class and international exposure (for more information on the sample and geographical distribution of completed questionnaires, see Annex 3, Table A.3.2 and Table A.3.3).

In addition, I use data from the World Values Survey and Asian Barometer Survey that have included occasional questions on immigration attitudes in their nationally representative surveys in China since the 1990s (see Annex 3, Table A.3.4 for details of surveys used). Drawing on these sources allows me to validate and triangulate interview findings, strengthening the paper's conclusions on Chinese (national) narratives on immigration. It also adds valuable descriptive statistics on a subject on which few data have been published.

#### **4. Analysis: From immigrants helping China “catch up” to China helping immigrants prosper**

In the following sections, I draw from the semi-structured interviews and national survey responses to analyze on-going changes in Chinese immigration attitudes in depth. I show that these attitudes are best explained through on-going changes in perceptions of China's status in a global developmental hierarchy. In fact, respondents put their views on China's rapid socio-economic development front and center in their evaluation of their personal interactions with foreigners, and of the different immigration policy areas discussed. In contrast to the earlier reform era, when the country was seen to be 'learning' from the outside world and 'open' in an indiscriminate manner, China is now considered powerful enough to exercise more control over immigration, whether that entails increased selectivity at the border, eradicating policy privileges for immigrants, or developing into a more full-fledged immigrant society with more options for permanent residency. Among the broad cross-section of the population I examine, I thus find a broadly shared frame for interpreting immigration issues, structured by a widespread shift in perceptions of China's national identity. I also find significant variation in attitudes, but less anti-immigration sentiment than existing studies done within subgroups of the Chinese population suggest.

### *a. The historical roots of Chinese attitudes towards immigrants*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, following a series of military defeats at the hands of Western countries and Japan, Chinese officials and intellectuals started to see their country as a latecomer to modernization. The West and Japan became reference points for China's development strategy, while at the same time intensified imperialism from these areas forced China to open parts of the country to foreign immigrants and trade, contributing to a chronic sense of foreign threat. In response, China's identity vis-à-vis developed countries became a core part of its nation and state-building project. This identity frequently took on an explicit ethno-racial component, in which a 'yellow race' was portrayed as competing in a racial hierarchy with 'white' developed nations ahead of it and 'brown' and 'black' peoples behind (Dikotter 1997).

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea emerged that standing up to and expelling foreigners was "the very definition of patriotism in modern China" (Lee 2014: 250). Reflecting this sentiment, the writer Lu Xun noted that Chinese people only had two polarizing terms of address for foreigners: "either 'beasts' or 'majesties'" (cited in Huang 2021: 112). At the same time, the increase in immigration to China from Japan, Russia and Western powers during this period resulted in significant Chinese-foreign exchange in a setting that has often been called "semi-colonial" (Bickers 2011). Following the establishment of the P.R.C. in 1949, opportunities for such exchange sharply dropped together with immigrant numbers as the Chinese state focused on eradicating imperialist influence and foreign ties became highly politicized. In 1955, the Chinese state imported a Soviet-style system of dealing with foreign visitors, aimed at both hosting and controlling foreign 'friends' and 'experts,' as welcomed foreigners were categorized (Brady 2003).

In the reform era, from the 1980s onwards, international mobility resumed at a speed that revealed the latent enthusiasm of the Chinese population for global engagement. 'Importing' foreign expertise through hiring foreign skilled professionals became a state priority. Other types of migration – from marriage migrants to traders and students – also increased as border controls relaxed. Dealing with immigrants became more quotidian in big urban centers and coastal and border areas with higher concentrations of foreigners. Data from the World Values Survey and Asian Barometer Survey shows a drop in anti-immigration sentiment in the 2000s compared to the 1990s: In 2007, only 15% was in favor of "strict limits" on foreigners in the labor market, vs. 40% in 1995. In these decades, educated, younger respondents were significantly more positive about immigrants than older and less-educated groups.

Although most immigrants came from East Asian and bordering countries, Chinese popular discourse has focused most on the white and black migrants deemed "most foreign" (Mathews 2015: 11). White Western migrants were associated with China's development aspirations and featured widely in advertising and popular media (Schein 1994). African trader communities that developed in Guangzhou, China's southern



manufacturing center, were initially welcomed for their economic contribution but soon attracted public controversy (Li et al 2012). Despite these communities' collapse in the 2010s, racist media discourse exaggerating their numbers has remained common (e.g. Lan 2016). While public displays of anti-immigrant sentiment have been uncommon, black African migrants have been more likely to trigger protest and xenophobia throughout the reform era (e.g. Sautman 1994), with processes of racialization taking place against the backdrop of power relations between Africa, China and the West (e.g. Monson 2015, Lan 2016, Castillo 2020). Outside scholarly debate, these issues remain underexamined. In his study of Chinese discourses of race, Yinghong Cheng (2019) analyzes how "a conscious or subconscious Chinese exceptionalism" that naturalizes a Han-centric racialized Chinese identity impedes public discussion of racism in the Chinese context.

While Chinese society was rapidly diversifying, the state has remained largely silent on the long-term impact of immigration on Chinese society. In the reform era, it has refrained from reforming immigration laws to accommodate permanent settlement but adopted many preferential policies focused on attracting certain types of professional migrants (called 'talent') and foreign students, including by offering tax breaks and scholarships. In the 2000s, especially, China's restrictive visa regulations were enforced loosely, except for occasional crackdowns, a management practice that was replaced by increased enforcement and control in the 2010s (Habicht 2020). In 2018, China established its first national immigration agency, which has largely continued the trend towards increased enforcement (see Chapter 1).

Despite the vast changes in China's global status and integration, its approach to internationalization has retained a tension between opening up and controlling foreign influence, which impacts how immigrants are seen and governed. At a state level, president Xi Jinping calls for more economic globalization, while also propagating a national identity that is built upon a 'myth of homogeneity' and does not include immigrants (or many members of Chinese minority groups) (Gan 2020). At a societal level, nationalist sentiment has strengthened in the last decade, while at the same time, China's internationalization continued to accelerate. Domestic consumption became increasingly global and international study and travel became much more accessible (Ma 2020). These contradictory developments affect societal views on immigration to China, leading in particular to a normalization of immigrant perceptions as well as a rise in saliency of some immigration issues.

### ***b. The normalization of immigrant perceptions***

An attitude of "worshipping the foreign" (崇洋媚外) was seen as an important component of the outward orientation of China's early reform period, when political caution towards the outside world, while not abandoned, was greatly reduced. It was especially extended to 'Western,' often white, immigrants, but also reflected a more

general sharp division between Chinese and foreigners. In the last two decades, whatever the details of people's experiences with immigrants, the "halo" (public interview P-26) around them had faded substantially.

Illustrating this shift in perception, respondents point to their personal experience. They describe how encountering an immigrant no longer feels "special" (e.g. 稀奇, 新奇). This contrasts with earlier memories, when the norm was to "form a crowd," either literally or in a figurative sense by showering the immigrant with attention, and treat them as a representative of a different world. Sometimes such memories were colored by suspicion, or by negative narratives from schoolbooks about foreigners' historical treatment of China, but more often respondents remembered seeing foreigners as "VIPs" (高人一等). As immigration to China diversified and spread to smaller cities, having a foreigner sit next to you at a restaurant in Jinan is now commonplace, whereas ten years ago one might have "continuously stared" (P-33).

Now, more and more Chinese have had personal experience or know people with experience living or traveling abroad. As a student who had studied in Japan put it: "After coming back, I started to think about what it would be like as a foreigner in China" (P-30). The increase in international mobility in both directions dismantled the idea that immigrants were in any way special. This extended to people who had not traveled abroad themselves. "I am no longer intrigued when I see a foreigner because when we Chinese go abroad, we are foreigners as well. Same thing," said one Shanghai-based shop-owner without personal experience of traveling abroad (P-12).

Respondents incorporate this normalization of mobility and exposure to immigrants into their wider views of how Chinese society has changed. Many remember growing up thinking that while many Chinese wanted to emigrate to improve their lives, it was difficult to imagine what foreigners might want to do in China. As material conditions in China improved, it made sense that there would be a counter flow of immigrants. The improved situation in China resulted in a rebalancing of the perceived social position of foreign migrants vis-à-vis Chinese nationals. As a Shanghai local working in finance put it:

*"10-20 years ago, we thought that all foreigners did pretty well, as long as they were white, for instance, their income would be quite good. Now foreigners who come work here make about the same ... and we don't just judge them by material standards, but also by their speech and behavior, ways of thinking etcetera. Evaluations of immigrants are now increasingly objective." (P-24)*

This idea of perceptions of foreigners in China becoming more "objective" or "comprehensive" was widespread in interviews in all three locations and extended to a diversity of migrants. Asked about 'foreigners,' respondents self-categorized immigrants in their answers. Like in the above quote, white Western foreigners have

often been considered the quintessential foreigners in reform era China. But many respondents also centered Asian and African immigrants in their responses. For all these groups, they reported a process of habituation that had changed their views, increasing their ability to go beyond overly negative or positive immigrant stereotypes. In Zhejiang villages, too, respondents noted, an African-American English teacher at the local high school or a transnational marriage of a villager and a Southeast-Asian wife would now hardly raise an eyebrow.

However, this shift, which many describe as a necessary corrective on the previous period, did not imply a homogenization of attitudes towards migrants across Chinese society. One divide was generational. Older people – for whom personal contact with foreigners used to simply be out of the question – were more likely to describe migrants as “guests” to be welcomed, invoking the polite high-socialist state discourse that reified a sharp China-foreign contrast and that remains common in state media (Brady 2003). In contrast, respondents in their twenties and thirties emphasized that their views differed from those of older generations, who they saw as stuck in a type of inferiority complex rooted in China’s less prosperous recent past. In the words of a Pinghu recent university graduate: “We are not curious anymore ... and I have never thought of China as backward. [Foreigners] are just from a faraway place” (P-42).

In addition, ‘normal’ does not equal ‘close’. Many note that they perceive little in-depth interaction with immigrants in their communities. In our 2020 survey, 57% of respondents report not knowing any foreigners personally. Some also expressed ideas about a hierarchy of the perceived ‘foreignness,’ of different migrant groups that echo a long history of racialized migrant categorization. As a Pinghu-based entrepreneur puts it: “I always feel Westerners are a bit more foreign” (P-36). In line with previous research, immigrants of Asian backgrounds are more likely to be referred to by their nationality, while other foreign nationals are more likely to be described as *laowai*, a well-known informal term for foreign nationals. The term is more strongly associated with white and, to a lesser extent, black immigrants, and other foreigners whose appearance and behavior seems further removed from that of native Chinese (Mao 2015). Its connotations are ambivalent, “on a continuum centering on neutral meaning but extends to two extremes of complimentary and derogatory meaning” (Mao 2015, 2136), perhaps explaining why this term was more common in the interviews conducted by Chinese researchers.

There are also indications that negative feelings surrounding local-foreign interactions are on the rise. In the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7, for which data were gathered in mainland China in 2018, 26% of Chinese respondents selected “foreigners” as a category of people they would not want living next to them, the highest percentage out of all six waves asking this question (in 2013 it was 12%). To a question about the level of trust for foreign nationals, the percentage of respondents that

answered “not much” jumped to 56% (vs. 30% in 2007 and 2013).<sup>92</sup> In our interviews, some respondents mention that as China’s relations with a particular country deteriorate, people can feel more hostile, making “nationalist, conservative” sounds on immigration more prominent.

Overall, while many still hardly ever encounter foreign migrants, the narrative has changed. Across a range of demographics, as Chinese citizens feel more confident about the outside world and China’s position in it, Chinese-foreign interactions became less special and are experienced as more equal. This change, often described as ongoing, informs debate on the effects of immigration and related policy issues.

### *c. Diverging views on the effects of immigration*

In evaluating the effects of immigration, a common reply was that the positives outweigh the negatives. However, the balance between positive and negative effects was changing, many noted, as China’s perceived need for foreign expertise and investment decreases. While past immigration is put primarily in a developmental framework, in thinking about current and future immigration, respondents also go into its social and political impact.

The historical arrival of immigrants is bound up in the larger narrative of China’s “reform and opening up” since the 1980s, which included an official call to participate in global exchanges. Economic immigrants especially from more developed regions were welcomed as part of this national development strategy. “They came to join our development efforts – that’s a good thing,” said a Shanghai-based TV-producer (P-2). Many connect the beneficial effects of foreign companies and investment, trade and technology, management practices and improved working conditions to economic immigration: “At the start of the reform period the change was the biggest... their advanced technology helped us develop, while opening new markets. Without these exchanges, development would have been less fast,” noted a middle-aged manager of a state-owned enterprise (P-29).

These widely mentioned economic benefits of incoming migration were considered less important as education levels and transnational expertise among the Chinese population increased. “This is the big trend,” said a Shanghai-based human resources officer at a German company who had been replacing foreign employees by local candidates (P-1). Previously, foreign candidates might have brought unique cultural and technical skills to a position (Farrer 2014). Now, however, Chinese and foreign candidates compete for the same positions, although such competition remains limited due to low overall immigrant figures. (“The issue is not the foreigners, but tightening employment,” as one Jinan-based respondent puts it.) The shift in perceptions of

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92 See Annex 4 for further selected survey data.

foreigners in China's labor market seems reflected in our 2020 survey. Respondents are divided on the question of whether China's need for foreign expertise is shrinking (31% agree, 23% disagree), while 41% express some worry about foreign professional migrants adding pressure to the job market. Other survey questions reflect an overall neutral to positive evaluation of the developmental impact of immigration, with 56% of respondents evaluating immigrants' impact on China's development as positive (vs. 35% neutral, 9% negative).

Reflecting the diversification of immigrant flows to China in the last two decades, respondents go beyond economic effects to mention a broad range of cultural and societal advantages and risks of immigration. Benefits mentioned include immigrants' contribution to English language education, international perspectives in workplaces and universities, and a general increase in cultural diversity. Views on immigrant effects displayed regional patterns. Shanghai-based respondents especially feel immigrants personally benefit their lifestyle. Some were positive about the extra options the gradual uptick of foreign migrants in professions considered 'lower-skill', such as domestic workers or restaurant staff, might provide. Outside Shanghai, respondents were more likely to point to China's 1.4 billion population as a reason against labor migration. There, too, responses mentioning foreign marriage migration as a partial solution for China's gender imbalance were more prominent.

When it comes to perceived negative effects of immigration, concerns are usually framed as moderate given the currently limited scale of immigration. As one 55-year-old respondent puts it, "China is strong now, it can take a bit of a challenge" (P-42). Relatively prominent concerns revolve around political issues (spying, separatists), unemployed foreigners, or social unrest caused by larger immigrant communities. These latter concerns are strongest among respondents outside Shanghai, five of whom focused on the perceived negative social effects of African migrants. Some cited media accounts on African migration to China, many of which have exaggerated its scale. In our survey, respondents estimate Africa to be the second-largest region of migrant origin (after Asia), when in reality migrant numbers from most other regions are higher. Student respondents also singled out ill-integrated South Korean students, the top country of origin for foreign students in China. In addition, fitting with the findings of Lan (2021) on the changing meaning of whiteness in urban China, some Shanghai-based respondents complain about entitled white migrants.

In addition to these socio-political concerns around immigration, Chinese respondents believe that immigration might have a positive aspect on cross-cultural communication. Respondents point out that personal interactions with immigrants allow them to go beyond nationalist education in forming their views of the world. At the same time, they believe immigrants living in China can help correct perceived international biases against China, for instance by spreading the message that "China is no longer a place with just straw huts, but also has villas" (P-19). In our survey 64%

of respondents agreed that immigrants improve mutual understanding, with only 6% disagreeing. These attitudes fit with state media discourse on foreign migrant ‘friends’ who are favorably disposed towards China, within an otherwise hostile environment that is ignorant of China’s developmental success (see Pulford 2021). However, evidence for this perceived effect has indeed been found, with Han (2017b) finding foreign students in Beijing universities improve their evaluation of China. As Chinese respondents consider their country an increasingly attractive immigration destination, widely shared policy priorities emerge across demographic groups on the need for immigration control and, especially, selection.

#### ***d. Widely shared views on the need for immigrant control and selection***

When it comes to immigration control, survey data show that moderate opinions in favor of the status quo continue to dominate. The minority share in favor of reducing immigration has been largely stable over the last decade: Our 2020 survey finds a minority of 24.9% of all respondents in favor of reducing immigration, where Han (2017a) found 25.2% in 2008. The 2014-2016 Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), using slightly different answer options, finds 28.4% in this camp. However, the make-up of those advocating more control has changed significantly. While WVS results show that proponents of immigration reduction in the ‘90s and early ‘00s were largely older and less formally educated, in recent surveys this group is diverse in terms of age and education background.

This trend primarily reflects increasing polarization among the highly educated. In the 2014-2016 ABS, about twice as many Chinese university-educated respondents wanted to reduce immigrant inflows, compared to those in favor of an increase. In this survey, the level of highly educated respondents in favor of immigrant reduction is 5% higher than the national average. In our 2020 survey, too, the previous pro-immigration slant of university- educated respondents that Han (2017a) for instance found in the 2008 China General Social Survey, has disappeared. Now, overall findings and those among the highly educated largely overlap. This emerging polarization of the highly educated unusual given the established relationship between higher levels of education and favorable attitudes towards immigration, can also be found in some European polls on immigration attitudes in the last decade. In Russia, for instance, those with university degrees are more negative than demographic groups with lower education levels.<sup>93</sup>

This recent convergence across levels of education helps explain the relative lack of generational divides in our interviews on discourses on control and especially immigrant selection. Regardless of location or age, respondents argue for stricter selection of immigrants on skills and/or political and cultural traits. “I think we don’t

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93 Neli Esipova, Anita Pugliese and Julie Ray, “Europeans most negative toward immigration,” *Gallup*, October 16, 2015, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/186209/europeans-negative-toward-immigration.aspx>.

need to control quantity, but we should control for the quality of people who come in,” as one young professional puts it (P-46). The main frame for immigrant selection is that of highly skilled, highly educated immigrants being welcome, regardless of nationality, as the threshold for admitting economic migrants should be raised as the country develops. “The United States is very demanding too...we have to be stricter,” said a middle-aged Pinghu resident (P-41). In addition to economic selection, a diverse minority of respondents emphasized political and cultural views in immigration selection, including “liking” and “approving of” (认同) the country and its cultural customs, as well as the absence of overly hostile views of the Chinese government.

Globally prevalent ‘talent’ discourse, which has been widely adopted by Chinese policy makers since the 2000s (Zweig and Wang 2013), overlaps with the Chinese concept of *suzhi*, a common if contested measure of population ‘quality’ that mixes connotation of skill levels and character traits. Some argue that as Chinese population *suzhi* has improved, the country should attract foreigners of a higher ‘caliber’ as well, and avoid admitting people who come to China because they were unsuccessful in their home countries. *Suzhi* discourse has been widely used, including by the state, to discuss internal migration, justifying structural education inequalities and restrictive settlement rules by emphasizing individual ability and striving (Kipnis 2006).

Chinese internal migrants connected immigration policy to their own experience migrating to Chinese cities. As Chinese cities set their own settlement requirements in accordance with the country’s tiered residential registration system, many internal migrants retain a temporary residential status in the place they work, not fully qualifying for citizen benefits unless they can meet big cities’ high threshold for settlement (for instance in terms of education and income). Because of the economic opportunity of these cities, many make do with this differentiated treatment. A 48-year old long-term internal migrant to Shanghai suggested foreign migrants do the same: “For us migrants in Shanghai, we also can’t settle. If we lose our jobs and can’t survive in Shanghai, we just go back to our home region” (P-8). Some advocate differentiated immigration rules for Chinese regions, making it harder for immigrants to move to cities like Shanghai and Beijing, just like it is for Chinese citizens.

Some interviewees singled out immigrants from developing countries and specifically black migrants for stricter immigration control, but less strongly than some of the previous research suggests. In my interviews, the minority that did so usually qualified their view by mentioning that these communities were generally unproblematic, or that it was a *suzhi* issue, “unrelated with the fact that they are foreign,” as a 29-year-old researcher emphasized (P-23). In our survey, we similarly find a negative bias towards migrants from African countries, with 22.5% feeling negative about African migrants coming to China. Unlike in the interviews, survey results also highlight more negative attitudes towards migrants coming from China’s geopolitical adversaries such as the United States (29%) and India (35.7%). By contrast, the share

of respondents feeling negative about migrants from Western Europe (10.1%) and East Asia (3.7%) is much lower.

Whether to justify immigration liberalization or restriction, respondents refer to China's development to justify their policy position: for those who do not want to reduce immigration, as China grows stronger, maintaining or increasing immigration can help make its companies, universities and cities globally competitive. But for people in favor of reducing migration, China's increased domestic competitiveness or internal development gaps are referenced to argue that economic migrants are less needed or should be more strictly regulated.

### *e. The growing salience of eradicating foreign privilege*

Unlike internal migration, immigration has generally not been considered a key societal issue in the reform era. The salience of immigration policy, or its relative importance among public concerns, has even hardly been studied but fragmented reports indicate it has been low. As Han (2017a) notes, "immigration is a topic that is not of great concern to either the Chinese government or the public" (127). However, there are indications that here too things are shifting. In our survey, 55% of respondents say controlling immigration is a higher or much higher priority for China than it was ten years ago. This percentage is higher in places with more foreigners, like Shanghai (77.5%) or Beijing (66%). Immigrant-related controversies also get bigger than they used to, with the debate surrounding a proposed permanent residency law in February 2020 running in the billions of online comments. In our interviews, respondents said that immigration topics seem to be "overrepresented" (P-16) online, leading to debate that is described as polarized and emotional, as well as "largely conservative" (P-25).

Besides the need for immigration control and selection, the most salient concern is that with 'privileged treatment' (优待) of immigrants living in China. In its everyday use in China, the term 'privileged treatment' includes a range of issues: it can refer to a type of voluntary 'VIP'-like treatment of foreigners by ordinary Chinese – helping them find their way in the city or giving them better service in a shop or restaurant – to labor market preferences for foreign nationals resulting in higher compensation, or to state policies such as state-sponsored scholarships for foreign students or tax benefits for foreign professionals and lenient treatment by police. Our survey results confirm that these concerns are widespread, with over half of respondents answering that foreigners are treated better (26%) or much better (29%) by state authorities.

These different types of 'supercitizen' treatment (超国民待遇), as it has been called, are all seen as historical products of an era in which immigrants were privileged because of their foreign identity (e.g. Brady 2003). In our interviews, four respondents recounted a tale of a Japanese migrant losing his bike and, aided by Chinese police, swiftly retrieving it, something that they considered unlikely in the case of a Chinese citizen losing their bike. China's development status now necessitates change,



respondents across regional and educational backgrounds note. As a security guard in Jinan puts it:

*“I feel that compared to other countries, in its quest to improve cultural exchange China has gone a bit overboard with accommodating foreign students. .... There was a stage in which foreign students were put first, and Chinese students were treated as second-rank ... Perhaps because otherwise they did not want to come. But now slowly it is all equal, and that’s how it should be, just like they would in the US.” (P-36)*

To many interviewees, the persistence of preferential state policies for some immigrant groups seems out of step with China’s current developmental status as a global power. However, their salience seems primarily connected to the politicization of the issue by online nationalists, who increasingly dominate China’s online public opinion sphere (Schneider 2018). The case cited in our interviews of the Japanese national retrieving his bike, for instance, can be traced back to 2012, when according to media reports at the time, the stolen bike was returned after the new owner learnt about the theft on social media. Friendly internet users, rather than Chinese police, played a key role, but in many online articles it has since been reframed as a textbook case of foreign privilege.<sup>94</sup> The case is typical of the limited information environment on this topic, in which nationalist blogs and social media posts highlight immigration-related content that fits a frame of foreign privilege, without providing relevant context.<sup>95</sup> At the same time, complex regulations requiring Chinese police to report cases related to a foreign national to different departments can lead to lax law enforcement, as police “don’t dare, don’t want to, and don’t know how” to handle immigrant-related cases (Li and Jiao 2020). In the view of a Pinghu-based official: “You can’t deny that in China, the state pays special attention to things that pertain to foreigners (涉外) .. but there is also a lot of online hype” (P-40).

As a contrast to foreign privilege, some respondents also saw immigrant discrimination, especially of Black people in China, as an urgent social issue. According to a Shanghai-based lawyer, common practices of privileging foreigners and of discriminating against them could be seen as two sides of the same coin: “It is rooted

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94 “日本小伙环游世界单车武汉被偷 网友接力找到车” [Japanese world traveler’s bike stolen in Wuhan – Netizens retrieve it], 凤凰新闻, February 22, 2012, [https://culture.ifeng.com/8/detail\\_2012\\_02/22/12690320\\_0.shtml](https://culture.ifeng.com/8/detail_2012_02/22/12690320_0.shtml).

95 In the case of foreign students, such context might include the fact that they are not allowed to opt out of more high-quality, expensive accommodation, or that a majority of foreign students funds their own study in China. For an analysis of why policy differentiation between Chinese and foreign students remains persistent, see 张端鸿, “来华留学生教育为何难以实现管理趋同化”(Why it is hard to integrate the education of foreign students coming to China), 中国科学报, July 17.

in the same issue of seeing foreigners as different from us” (P-16). He expressed an interest in moving beyond such dichotomous thinking, given China’s emerging identity as an immigrant destination. In our survey, we see a related interest: 55% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that China needs to strengthen education on racial discrimination (vs. 6% disagreed, and 36% neutral).

#### ***f. Immigration as part of Chinese national identity***

While today China is generally not considered an ‘immigration country,’ looking into the future, respondents differ on whether that might change. To some, this is unlikely (“China is still very traditional” (P-33)), while others see a connection between immigration and development that makes this seem all but inevitable. As one Shanghai-based programmer put it: “As China becomes a global power... the country will have to consider how to define itself, as a Chinese nation [Zhonghua minzu], or as a global nation – encompassing hundreds of *minzu*” (P-6). Statements such as these showcase how debates and positions on immigration are inherently related to broader perceptions of Chinese national identity.

In contrast to the polarized online debate on citizenship and permanent residency, interview and online survey respondents were largely accepting or positive on the issue of increasing permanent residency options for long-term immigrants. On other integration-related policy issues, too, survey respondents are less restrictive than current Chinese immigration policy, with only small minorities opposed to opening up employment for foreign spouses, or allowing foreign students to search for employment after graduation. Their answers reflect how, to Chinese citizens uninformed on the specifics of current immigration regime, China’s de facto immigrant settlement has to some extent shifted a previous paradigm in which foreigners were “invariably sojourners” (Lee 2014: 283). Many referenced the large number of Chinese emigrants in the reform era to make the point that foreigners settling in a migration destination long-term was normal. While foreigner naturalization hardly exists in China, some cited the trend of naturalizing athletes, including some without a Chinese ethnic background, as an example of how even China’s strong norm of ethnic citizenship might change over time (see also Sullivan et al 2022).

Respondents offered both international and homegrown models of what such a future might look like. In addition to references to the US and to Silicon Valley, three respondents mentioned China’s Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), remembered at its height as a prosperous multi-ethnic empire, as a historical reference point for China’s ability to deal with large numbers of immigrants. The Chinese leadership presents China’s current rise as a ‘return’ to Tang-like glory, leading some to extrapolate that this should come with similar levels of internationalization. The on-going integration of internal migrants in cities like Shanghai, and of ethnic minorities are also cited as examples of how China has experience managing diversity. They note that Chinese state and

society will have to address immigration management more proactively, as much of its social infrastructure is not well-suited to immigrants, and improve citizen education on immigration

At the same time, immigration is considered an issue on which public awareness is low. It can be conflated with foreign policy issues, to the extent that “ordinary people will change their views of foreign residents from that country when political relations change,” as a Pinghu-based professional put it (P-46). Other aspects of China’s internationalization, including emigration of Chinese, have developed faster, so that public discourse on emigration is considered more informed and sophisticated than that on immigration. “People are not as aware of the foreigners living right by them,” as one student explained. Chinese society, she added, is still primarily “Chinese”: “It is a bit hard to imagine what it would be like if foreigners became very visible and prominent members of society” (P-30).

Some of this social distance shines through in vocabulary. Formal terms for foreign nationals with a history dating back to the early reform era or even the 50s and ‘60s, such as “international friends” (国际友人), “foreign friends” (外国朋友), and to a lesser extent “foreign experts” (外国专家) have been kept alive through state categories and common usage and also feature in interviews, especially in Jinan and Pinghu. Outside Shanghai’s metropolitan environment, respondents were also more likely to question China’s attraction to immigrants. According to the Pinghu-based official “it will take another 20-30 years of development” (P-40) before China will start to attract enough immigrants to become an immigration society. Contrasting their views with those of Shanghai-based respondents who were “very fed up” (P-15) with the number of immigrants they encounter emphasizes how regionally varying perceptions of China’s development influence immigration attitudes, within a broadly shared frame of reference.

## **5. Discussion: A developmental lens on immigration attitudes and policy preferences**

While often discussed in tandem with nationalist sentiment and perceptions of foreign nations and globalization, ordinary people’s views on immigration cannot be conflated with these issues. This paper has focused on immigration attitudes in China, where there is a tradition of defining the nation against foreign enemies but immigrants only arrived in significant numbers in recent decades. It finds that, overall, the emerging immigration attitudes in Chinese society are moderate and multi-faceted. This finding stands in contrast to literature that suggests xenophobic sentiments dominate Chinese immigration attitudes, due to historical, ethnocultural or political reasons (e.g. Dikötter 1997, Cheng 2019).

This research finds that Chinese respondents approach immigration through the lens of the country’s development. In explaining their diverse 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. Evidence from interviews and survey data suggests that in the 1990s, a decade in which immigrants' presence in most of China was slowly increasing from a low base, public sentiment was cautious and to some extent divided on this trend. This changed in the 2000s, in which 'connecting with the world' (与世界接轨) was a key developmental focus of the Chinese state, and when anti-immigrant sentiment in surveys drops significantly and moderate attitudes dominate, as immigration in this period was considered most beneficial to China according to respondents. This shift has been accompanied by more outspoken anti-immigration attitudes among parts of the population in the 2010s, a decade characterized by Xi Jinping's projection of China as a confident, globally competitive power.

In 2020, respondents consider China's development to have entered a new stage. In this developmentalist national identity narrative, China's rising status has made it a more attractive immigrant destination. As a result, the increasingly developed country should be able to set and enforce its own immigration agenda, whether this includes a lower threshold for immigrants' permanent residency or enforcing more selective admission standards. In this respect, respondents largely model their views on perceptions of immigration control in Global North countries, although internal migration practices also play an important role.

A popular concern with catching up to the rich nations that had imperialized the country has been central to China's nation-building. Some have argued that contemporary Chinese society "has not fundamentally changed" in its attitudes towards foreign nations since Lu Xun's observation over a century ago, either looking up to or down on other countries and unable to see them as equals (2021: 126). By contrast, I find that while a developmental hierarchy continues to inform immigration discourse, the fact that China is now perceived to have risen to a higher position enables a more relaxed discourse. The study finds continuities in Othering practices, such as when White migrants are described as more foreign and in the stigmatization of Black migrants. These racialized perceptions, and their impact on attitudes towards different immigrant groups, have more recently also been found by Shao et al (2023), who examine racial and gender bias using survey experiments, and require further study. However, my findings highlight that they are not the only dimension in respondents' evaluations of immigrants and immigration policy, and exist next to ideas about economic, political and cultural development in the reform era. Some of these are usually left out in studies of Chinese immigration discourse, such as the enthusiasm for foreign contact that also characterized this period (Lee 2014, Chen 1995).

Perceptions of China's development also explain what is currently the most salient immigration issue: the unacceptability of policies privileging immigrants. Informed by (social) media critiques of these policies, respondents reject the policy tradition

of state actors treating foreign nationals as ‘guests,’ who are sharply demarcated from local society and receive superior material treatment or services (Brady 2003), as incompatible with China’s current level of development. For some, controlling immigration also directly connects to another key national identity narrative: that of China’s historical semi-colonial victimhood at the hand of foreign enemies, which has been kept alive in nationalist propaganda and education (Callahan 2015: 222). In addition, concerns with China’s image abroad, which immigrants should help improve, echo long-standing Chinese discourse on the outside world’s unwillingness to recognize China’s development. Alongside the spread of Chinese versions of globally common nativist discourse, especially among educated internet users, these strands of historical symbolism help explain rising anti-immigration attitudes among university-educated Chinese.

The Chinese case strengthens findings in the immigration reception literature emphasizing the relevance of ‘state of the nation’ concerns in determining immigration attitudes (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). The exceptional speed of China’s development trajectory makes it an interesting case of early-stage immigrant reception and adds to literature on the importance of national history and development trajectories in shaping immigration reception (Brubaker 1992, Zolberg 2006). It also emphasizes change over time. As my findings show, and complementing previous findings on the shifting social position of foreign migrants in China’s urban centers (e.g. Farrer 2019), Chinese individuals remember how recently they felt very differently about China’s relation to the outside world, resulting in a specific set of immigration attitudes and priorities. Lastly, in a context in which ‘nation-building’ and ‘economic development’ were all but synonymous for several decades, evaluations of immigrants’ economic contribution continue to dominate.

A developmental lens on immigration attitudes thus highlights host society responses that seem less present in countries whose citizens mostly consider their country ‘developed’, and where the immigration attitudes debate departs from the assumption that their country is a highly attractive immigrant destination. By contrast, my findings on China highlight pride in the country’s increasing ability to attract immigrants, confidence in increased state capacity to control immigration risk, as well as frustration with some immigrants being privileged over local residents and with the country’s global reputation. While the concrete content of national identity narratives will vary, my findings suggest a relationship between immigration attitudes and the ‘catching-up logic’ of modernization discourses that might have broader relevance to the study of immigrant-reception beyond high-income, especially Western contexts.

In China, recent developments such as the polarization of immigration attitudes among highly educated groups, and the politicization of some socio-cultural immigration issues suggest that immigration attitudes might continue to change. As China’s economic development slows and perceptions of the country’s identity further develop,

diverse socio-cultural aspects of immigration might start to outweigh socio-economic reasoning, as they have in many Western countries (Hammar 2011). While I suggest there might be patterns to immigration attitudes that set apart so-called developmental contexts from so-called developed ones, the Chinese case reminds of the contingency of these categories and of “the interconnections of South and North” (Nawyn 2016).