



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Speelman, J.T.

### **Citation**

Speelman, J. T. (2023, September 19). *Beyond friends and foes: immigration policymaking in contemporary China*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3641093>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3641093>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# How China's nationalist online sphere constrains policymaking – The case of foreigners' permanent residency reform<sup>96</sup>

## 1. Introduction

On February 27, 2020, China's Ministry of Justice published a draft version of new regulations governing foreigners' permanent residency in mainland China for public comment. The draft regulations would be China's first immigration legislation since the establishment of a national immigration agency in 2018, and represented a significant step towards a more comprehensive legal framework on immigration. However, by the next morning, the draft had become the subject of intense public debate. Overnight, the topic had received over 130 million views on social media platform Weibo, a number that would rise to more than 4 billion views over the next week (Zhang B. 2020). Comments were overwhelmingly negative, expressing fear that the regulations would lead to increased immigration with negative impact on Chinese society. The top-voted comments below many posts were simple expressions of opposition, such as “no no no” or “resolutely opposed.”

In response to the raging online debate, immigration experts and officials rushed to explain the state rationale for the law in hundreds of media articles and op-eds. That week, one mid-ranking official at China's national immigration agency, who usually only shared occasional family pictures, posted fourteen media articles on the regulations. In one article that he posted, three experts pointed out that improving China's permanent residency for foreign nationals was a key step in making China competitive in a global

---

96 This chapter was published as: Tabitha Speelman, “How China's Online Nationalists Constrain Policymaking – the Case of Foreigners' Permanent Residency Reform, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2022.

race for ‘talent’ and the trajectory of the country’s rise.<sup>97</sup> Others emphasized that the regulations adjusted but did not fundamentally reform China’s existing immigration system – and that China’s notoriously high threshold for permanent residency largely remained in place. However, the intensity of the outrage – with 3,5 million people posting on Weibo even as censors were limiting their number – had made the draft untenable to state leadership. On March 8, 2020, the Ministry of Justice and National Immigration Administration (NIA) published a report stating that the public’s “high level of concern” would be seriously considered, and that the draft would be revised.<sup>98</sup> Ever since, the regulations have been shelved.

This article analyzes elite-public interactions leading up to, during, and after the controversy around the permanent residency draft regulations (MoJ 2020). The debate surrounding the permanent residency regulations (‘the P.R. debate’) constitutes one of the largest public responses to any Chinese public consultation procedure. Its scale has been described by experts as surprising to immigration state actors, who had proved themselves to be out of touch with public immigration sentiment. This study asks: What factors contributed to this miscalculation of public sentiment, and what can the P.R. debate tell us about the role of public opinion in Chinese policymaking today?

The public pushback against the P.R. regulations stands out for its occurrence in a relatively marginal policy area. Chinese citizens’ previous mobilization in response to public consultation procedures has mostly happened in key domestic policy areas such as healthcare reform, education, or the regulations around marriage and divorce (Balla and Xie 2021). By contrast, immigration policy has previously received little attention from policymakers and the Chinese public alike. While China’s development has resulted in rapid growth of immigrant numbers in the last two decades, overall numbers are small relative to the population size and policy reforms have been gradual and technocratic, with a small number of influential policy makers and advisers dominating policy debate (Pieke 2011). Policymaking has focused on facilitating economic immigration, while long-term strategy on issues like immigrant settlement and integration has been kept minimal, as foreign migration retained some political sensitivity to a ruling party basing its legitimacy on liberating China from foreign imperialism. As a result, official public discourse and communication on immigration has been largely absent, while media coverage remains dominated by formulaic state propaganda.

---

97 “国际移民研究中心专家热议《中华人民共和国外国人永久居留管理条例（征求意见稿）》” [Experts from the international migration research center debate the ‘P.R.C. Regulations for the management of foreigners’ permanent residency’ (draft for public comment) ], 国际移民研究中心, February 28, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/R6jmUrxdgJzo7fVpzU4OoQ>.

98 “国家移民管理局召开座谈会就《中华人民共和国外国人永久居留管理条例》（征求意见稿）听取意见” [National Immigration Administration meeting discusses ‘P.R.C. Regulations for the management of foreigners’ permanent residency’ (draft for public comment) ], March 8, 2020, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/08/content\\_5488632.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/08/content_5488632.htm).

A permanent residency law adopted in 2004 was hardly implemented, with only 10,200 immigrants awarded the status in the 2004-2016 period. It was only with the renewed top-down push for talent attraction under Xi Jinping that the development of a more comprehensive immigration system started to rise on the policy agenda, with a series of policy plans and local policy trials rolled out since 2015. At the same time, public concern with (perceived) irregular migration, especially in connection to African migrant communities in southern China, has increased in the last decade (e.g. Lan 2017). But perhaps given its limited absolute scale compared to China's internal migration, the salience and securitization of immigration has been low, with state actors – until recently – rarely engaging the public on the issue (Chou et al 2016).

However, since the 2015-2017 refugee surge to European countries, often framed as a 'crisis', Chinese 'ultranationalists,' a group that increasingly dominates online Chinese public debate, has grown interested in the issue of immigration as part of their affinity with global 'alt right' populist trends. This group combines Western 'alt right' groups' concerns with a majority identity under threat with previous forms of nationalism and racism in Chinese cyberspace (Zhang 2019, Yang and Fang 2021). As a result, anti-immigrant rhetoric in the Chinese online sphere has increased. During the P.R. debate, this group's extreme anti-immigration views found a wider online public, with state and media sources competing with more moderate viewpoints. 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 P.R. debate has been taken by elites as an important or even representative part of Chinese public opinion on immigration and indeed of the national character (国情). This has resulted in stalled reforms and a reshuffling of state-elite and state-public relations in the immigration policy field.

Previous scholarship has demonstrated how "a strident turn" in China's foreign policy solidified as the interests of state and popular nationalists increasingly converged (Zhao 2013). The permanent residency debate provides an example of popular nationalism thwarting a domestic policy reform. In addition to their relatively influential position on familiar hot-button issues such as China-Japan relations, popular nationalists can play a bottom-up politicizing role on previously marginal policy issues such as immigration, hereby surprising the state. I argue that the on-going deepening of state control over the information environment further limits public debate and state information gathering while empowering a vocal nationalist minority. The issue of immigration, a domestic policy issue with foreign policy dimensions, also showcases the contradictions within current Chinese state strategy between fueling nationalist sentiment as a means to legitimate Communist Party rule and a continued commitment to deepening China's global integration.

At the same time, the Chinese permanent residency debate demonstrates the relevance of public opinion to immigration reform in a non-democratic policymaking

process. Understudied in autocratic policy environments (Natter 2018), my analysis shows how reform-era China follows a trajectory similar to other early-stage immigrant-receiving contexts, in which immigration policymaking undergoes a transition from being a technocratic policy realm, dominated by a small number of policy makers and advisers, to becoming more politicized and capable of generating a high level of public interest (Scholten 2011).

## **2. Literature review: Public opinion and popular nationalism in Chinese policymaking**

Responding to public concerns – or showcasing such responsiveness – has become a growing priority for Chinese state actors in the reform era. While the need for elite support has traditionally been considered more vital for authoritarian regime survival, Chinese leaders frequently emphasize the importance of public opinion, with president Xi Jinping stating in 2013 that “winning or losing public support is an issue of the CCP’s survival or extinction.”<sup>99</sup> Following the fall of the Soviet Union and China’s CCP legitimacy crisis in 1989, especially, the Communist Party has gradually placed more value on public accountability as a way to manage the demands of an increasingly heterogeneous society and avoid, as one top official put it, “isolation from the masses” (Göbel 2013). Such state responsiveness is important both at a strategic level, with Chinese leadership incorporating salient concerns in policy planning to strengthen public support (e.g. Stepan et al 2016), and with regard to specific controversies, on which the desire to maintain social stability and legitimacy dominates (Chen et al 2016). This aspect of Chinese political culture leads Wenfang Tang to describe the Chinese regime as “hyperresponsive,” with a populist instinct integral to its political survival (Tang 2016).

As public pressure has been able to influence policy more directly and more frequently, sometimes resulting in major policy shifts, scholars have noted that the Chinese public is now “seriously involved in the agenda-setting process” (Wang 2008: 59). The rise of the internet, allowing public contention to spread fast and wide, is widely considered to have strengthened these dynamics. As a more vibrant public sphere emerged online, the number of ‘public opinion incidents’ (舆论事件), or contentious public events in which the state considers public expression to go beyond the bounds of its ‘safety valve’ function, increased (Lei 2016). In this context, the Chinese government has increased its investment both in understanding and controlling public attitudes and concerns.

---

99 “Study history, be close to the people,” *China Daily*, July 25, 2013, <http://english.cri.cn/6909/2013/07/25/53s777949.htm>.

As a result, the Chinese policy process has become more open to external voices, giving rise to policy networks advocating for elite interests and channeling public concerns in areas on which the state is insufficiently informed (E.g. Mertha 2009). Public consultation on legal proposals became institutionalized in 2000, following the adoption of the Legislation Law (Balla and Xie 2011). A commercial industry providing public opinion polling and monitoring services assists the state's censorship apparatus, but also provides state actors with policy input (Creemers 2017). An ever-increasing amount of resources have been invested in 'guiding' public opinion, for instance by repressing dissenting voices while increasing the production of state voices online (e.g. Göbel 2013). Given the states' obsession to both know and control public sentiment, in the Chinese context public opinion (舆论) can be seen as a "utility for authority to rule" (Wu 2020), rather than a representation of the will of an autonomous society.

The way in which these policy-opinion feedback loops play out on concrete policy issues has been most studied with regards to the effect of popular nationalism on Chinese foreign policy. After 1989, the CCP's propaganda strategies fostered the rise of contemporary Chinese nationalism, appealing to deep-rooted nationalist sentiment and developing patriotic education campaigns to establish nationalism at the core of its legitimacy narrative (Zhao 1998). Scholars vary in their assessment of the state's ability to control the new generation of vocal nationalists that these efforts helped produce. However, there is significant evidence that through their ability to mount large-scale offline or online protest, popular nationalists at times constrain policymakers, who face an audience cost when foreign policy is considered too 'weak' to parts of the Chinese public (Gries 2004, Shirk 2007, Chen Weiss 2014). To what extent such public sentiment drives foreign policy decisions independently remains unclear, as popular nationalist views can converge with elite interests (Zhao 2013, Jie 2016). In fact, public opinion in China seems particularly impactful on issues outside the regime's core interests on which top policymakers "lack a strong preference or are not in agreement" (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, Steinberg et al 2021).

What parts of the Chinese public are represented in 'public opinion' on a given issue, and to what extent Chinese authorities are aware of population-wide attitudes, can be difficult to determine. Studies of specific policy issues, such as the death penalty, show that national survey results can differ significantly from the way public opinion on a policy issue is construed in policy debate (J.Z. Liu 2021). Some believe mapping the often 'unexpected breadth of views' (Mazzacco and Kennedy 2022) found in surveys on many political issues can help scholars assess Chinese state claims about domestic pressure (Chen Weiss 2019). However, others emphasize the overrepresentation of vocal minorities in state understandings of public opinion. Given the state's high level of concern for social stability, such minority opinion can have an outsized influence on policy (Lagerkvist 2005: 128).

As a domestic policy issue on which popular nationalists have strong opinions, but which has so far remained outside of China's core interests, the P.R. debate is well-positioned to explore how public opinion can shape and constrain its authoritarian policymaking. With power centralizing under Xi Jinping, central leadership has arguably become subject to more direct pressure from public criticism, making responsiveness more important (Chen Weiss 2019, Gries and Wang 2021). However, this dynamic has also strengthened state resolve to further control media narratives and limit independent voices. Given the usefulness of popular nationalism to the state, popular nationalists have been relatively spared by state censors and have instead flourished in the increasingly controlled media environment (Schneider 2018).<sup>100</sup>

This analysis of an attempt to reform China's immigration system contributes to a growing body of literature on the way nationalism in China's public sphere interacts with policymaking, as well as the role of public opinion in Chinese policymaking more broadly. By dissecting the dynamics around the permanent residency debate, this study provides insight into the politicizing role of ultranationalists and its effect on policy. It shows how nationalist discourse can overwhelm public debate on a new policy issue, in the absence of a variety of (state) perspectives and public knowledge. This politicization has repercussions for the wider policy field, limiting the space for research and policy dialogue and empowering conservative voices. Through its showcasing of an especially immediate state response to an unexpected audience cost, the critical case of the P.R. policy debate can provide insight into a wider trend in Chinese policymaking beyond foreign policy, in which online nationalists exploit the tension in Chinese state strategy between strident nationalist messaging and a range of global and domestic commitments to influence an expanding range of policy areas.

### **3. Methods**

This paper draws on interviews, survey data and media analysis to comprehensively map the permanent residency debate. First, the author analyzes a mix of media and policy sources from the time of the controversy. In addition to the draft text of the regulations and related policy announcements, these include 50 pages of online comments below a state media announcement of the public consultation procedure

---

100 "China's nationalistic cancel culture is out of control", *Protocol*, December 30, 2021, <https://www.protocol.com/china/china-nationalism-cancel-culture>.

posted on social media platform Weibo on February 27, 2020,<sup>101</sup> 75 media articles on the controversy, collected between February 27-March 8 2020, and over 200 pages of Chinese-language expert commentary on the debate.<sup>102</sup> For the online comments, a sentiment and an inductive thematic analysis was conducted (see Table 6.1 and Table 6.2) (Saldana 2015).

Second, the article draws from a body of 14 expert interviews with immigration officials and scholars addressing permanent residency, China's wider immigration reform and the role of elite and public consultation in the immigration policymaking process. These interviews, which took place between April 2019 and September 2020, provide insight into the policymaking dynamics of a notoriously opaque policy area. Semi-structured expert interviews, allowing for articulation of and reflection on discursive strategies, have previously been used successfully to study relations between the Chinese government and other societal groups (e.g. Kennedy 2008). A number of these interviewees also participated in the P.R. regulations drafting process and contributed to the debate. However, quotes from the interviews are anonymized, as part of the agreed interview conditions.

Finally, to contextualize the online response to the P.R. draft regulations, the article mobilizes data on Chinese public immigration attitudes. The author draws on data from a pioneering national online survey conducted in July 2020 as part of a team at East China University for Science and Technology. 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). The survey, as well as an accompanying qualitative study consisting of 46 semi-structured interviews on immigration policy with a diverse sample of Chinese

---

101 Following the online outcry, like for other government announcements of the regulations, the comment section below this post was closed off to the public, on whom the irony of a public consultation procedure limiting public comment was not lost. For more online comments from the debate, see Kenrick Davis, "Proposed Residency Changes Spark Racist Backlash in China," *Sixth Tone*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005267/proposed-residency-changes-spark-racist-backlash-in-china>; Tan Enru 谭恩如, "中国网友抵制外国人永居权立法" [Chinese netizens resist foreign permanent residency legislation], *The Initium*, March 1, 2020, <https://theinitium.com/article/20200301-internet-observation-foreign-permanent-residence/>.

102 Published in traditional media outlets, academic publications as well as WeChat public accounts of migration thinktanks and research centers.



residents, included questions on permanent residency and the saliency of immigration management, previously not studied in the Chinese context.<sup>103</sup>

#### **4. The 2020 permanent residency debate**

##### ***a. Permanent residency reform in mainland China: A compromise policy***

Immigration to China rapidly increased in the reform era, with more diverse and permanent immigrant communities forming in large cities and border areas. However, legal pathways towards permanent residency have remained very limited. Most long-term immigrants reside in China on annual residence permits, contributing to an image of immigrants' transient 'sojourner' status in Chinese society. Foreign migration retained some political sensitivity to a ruling party basing its legitimacy on liberating China from foreign imperialism. As a result, policymaking has focused on facilitating economic immigration, while long-term strategy has been minimal. While policy-making elites consider public opinion important to immigration policy, official public discourse and communication on immigration has been largely absent. Media coverage remains dominated by formulaic state propaganda.

While permanent residency for foreigners was first mentioned in the P.R.C.'s 1985 foreigner management law, which reestablished immigration in the reform era, dedicated P.R. regulations were only published in 2004, prompted by China's accession to the World Trade Organization. The establishment of a P.R. program was heralded as a sign of China's increased global integration, but its stringent and unclear application criteria led to limited, case-by-case implementation. Rather than becoming a standardized bureaucratic procedure, foreign nationals with P.R. status generally received it as a token of official appreciation for their contributions to China's development. (American billionaire Elon Musk, for instance, was awarded permanent residency status by China's premier Li Keqiang after he opened a Tesla factory in Shanghai in 2019.) The reluctance to deal with issues of long-term settlement and integration is also illustrated by the absence of these topics in China's main piece of immigration legislation, the 2012 Exit-Entry management law.

The 2020 draft regulations were the culmination of a decade of efforts to make China's P.R. system more operational. Discussion of its reforms has been embedded in the growing demand for a more flexible immigration status, most notably among (former) Chinese nationals who naturalized elsewhere. While immigrant lobbying in

---

103 Relevant survey questions: 'To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Foreign migrants who meet relevant criteria should be allowed to obtain permanent residency?', 'In your opinion, how long should foreign migrants minimally reside in China in order to qualify for permanent residency?' (Fill in the blank.)

Relevant interview questions: 'Have you heard of the draft permanent residency regulations published in February of this year?', 'What do you think of permanent settlement for foreigners as a policy direction?' 'In your opinion, what criteria should immigrants meet in order to qualify for Chinese permanent residency?'

China has been limited by restrictions on foreign-led organizing, with foreign business organizations the main conduits,<sup>104</sup> diaspora demands have been better represented (Liu and Van Dongen 2016). Diaspora lobbying efforts have focused on China's ban on dual nationality.<sup>105</sup> Since 1999 at least 5 applications to amend the Nationality Law were made by delegates of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Habicht and Richter 2022). Prominent thinktanks like the Center for China and Globalization (CCG) have also long lobbied for double nationality, and for a Chinese diaspora I.D. card, modelled on the Indian Overseas Citizenship immigration status.

However, the issue of whether or not China should start allowing dual nationality became divisive among immigration policy elites. Largely formed in the drafting process of the Exit-Entry law, China's immigration policy advising circle consists of researchers and expert practitioners most of whom have a legal and/or public security background, with some diaspora affairs. While this group agrees on the need to reform China's highly incomplete immigration system, they differ on the extent to which systems in established immigration countries provide a model for China. While pro-liberalization immigration advocates, like legal scholar Liu Guofu, argue that opening up dual nationality contributes to China's diaspora strategy by solving practical issues for returning emigrants, other immigration policy advisers have criticized these views for being overly individualistic and going against China's geopolitical interests (e.g. Gao 2013). As this debate remained in stalemate, a reform of the permanent residency system has emerged as a politically acceptable policy alternative.

Although central government resolve to reform the P.R. system can be dated back to at least 2012, the 2020 draft regulations were first announced in a 2016 'Opinion' published by the Central Party Office and the State Council on strengthening the system (CPC 2016b). Part of a wider top-down campaign to improve China's talent attraction, this formed the start of a period of rapid policy activity. The 'Opinion' states that a reformed permanent residency system requires more full-fledged "immigration management departments" resulting in the establishment of China's first dedicated immigration agency in 2018. It primarily contextualizes China's need for "a more open and confident permanent residency policy" in the state's talent attraction effort, but also acknowledges the role permanent residency could play in "fostering diaspora

---

104 While I did not find evidence of foreign business associations being part of the policy debate on permanent residency, the role of these associations in immigration policy deserves further study, at the local level – as demonstrated by case studies like Cheuk (2016) but also at the national level. See for instance, the case of tax cuts for foreign nationals that were prolonged following resistance from foreign business: Frank Tang, "China's Expat Tax System: Who pays and how does it work?" *South China Morning Post*, January 9, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3162559/chinas-expat-tax-system-who-pays-and-how-does-it-work>

105 Adopted in the 1950s as a foreign policy gesture towards Southeast Asian post-colonial states in which Chinese diaspora loyalty was politicized, China has maintained its ban on dual nationality (although de facto dual nationality has become more common).

resources.” In a press conference at the time, the director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office puts it more bluntly, stating that the ‘Opinion’ “responds to the demands of foreign ethnic Chinese friends.”<sup>106</sup> Following the ‘Opinion’, a drafting process was started, aided by policy trials in several cities. In Shanghai, the key trial location, the total number of P.R. permits tripled from 2404 in 2015 to 7311 in 2018 (on a registered foreign population of 172,000).

In this context, the 2020 draft of the ‘Regulations on the Administration of Permanent Residency for Foreigners’ was welcomed by (most) immigration experts, many of whom had been consulted on its development. In line with expectations, China would formally expand the pool of immigrants that could qualify for P.R. to a still select but larger group of high-income or highly educated long-term migrants. Although the scale of the liberalization was limited, the draft regulations could be considered a “breakthrough” or “leap” in China’s immigration development (S-R1, 8/2020; S-R4, 8/2020). Rather than as a political privilege, it presented permanent residency as a right for any tax-paying foreigner who meets the salary and residential requirements. In addition to the familiar categories for individuals ‘outstanding contributions’ to China’s economic and social development, the draft introduces a link between length of stay and salary threshold. Professionals who have resided in China for four years need to earn six times the average salary in their area of residence to qualify, while with six years of residential stay at the time of application face a lower salary threshold of three times the average local salary. PhD holders working in certain sectors would not face any salary threshold (Article 15).

As is usual for Chinese laws and regulations, the draft also contained several ‘catch all’ clauses. Article 19 allows for ‘other legitimate reasons’ leading to permanent residency status. The draft also introduces possible future selection mechanisms without much detail, to be set up by the National Immigration Administration together with other relevant departments, such a “possible quota system” (Article 7), and a point system to be established “at an appropriate time” (Article 8). This vagueness of the draft – which read to some as strategic and to others like a rush job– became one of many points of public criticism in the unexpected debate following its publication.

### ***b. The P.R. debate: Selling out the country to (fake) foreigners***

While for immigration experts the draft regulations were an overdue update to China’s permanent residency system, many Chinese citizens did not even know their country had such a system. Social media posts show internet users unaware of the details of the current restrictive P.R. system, with many worried that the regulations would lead to immigrants settling in China indefinitely in large numbers. Confusion about the topic

---

106 “国侨办主任裘援平：目前尚未考虑出台“华裔卡” [Currently not considering a ‘Chinese diaspora card’], 中国新闻网, March 14, 2016, [http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/vom/2016-03/14/content\\_5053211.htm](http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/vom/2016-03/14/content_5053211.htm).

was also common. In the words of one internet user: ‘Can the government give more context for this? I do not think we have sufficient information to go on.’ However, the social media debate quickly became dominated by strongly negative, ethnonationalist sentiment, often expressed in highly emotional terms (“As a Han Chinese, I am crying softly,” as one top-voted comment reads). Like in previous studies of Chinese right-wing discourse, only a very small number of posts offer alternative viewpoints (see Table 1). The similarity between messages, with some up-voted comments copy-pasted by different users across different threads, and the speed with which they spread, suggested a level of coordination between influencers, which has been a characteristic of Chinese right-wing online communities (Zhang 2019, Yang and Fang 2021).

*Table 6.1.* Sentiment analysis of Weibo comment sample

Sentiment	Number of posts
Negative	714
Ambivalent/unclear	160
Positive	12

As the various hashtags attracted a wider audience, the announcement of the draft regulations triggered discussion of areas of discontent with immigration and its impact on Chinese society at large. Here, previously existing salient aspects of Chinese immigration debate were invoked. These include racist attitudes towards Black trader communities in southern China, the scale and social impact of which have long been exaggerated in ‘clickbait’ online coverage, and a long-standing public unease about preferential policies for foreign nationals. These policies, designed to increase China’s international engagement and ranging from state scholarships for foreign students to tax privileges for foreign professionals, are increasingly considered discriminatory to locals, and would contribute to China attracting the ‘wrong’ kind of immigrants.

The draft regulations to many seemed to fit in a tradition of the state privileging foreign nationals, at a time when domestic employment and residential conditions for many Chinese citizens are considered far from adequate. Attracting larger numbers of immigrants to aid China’s development, also sounds inappropriate to some, given China’s recent history of government-enforced family planning. Some suggest revising the regulations to eliminate any loopholes for so-called ‘low-quality’ migrants, and to include guarantees that P.R. holders would not be privileged over local Chinese.

But these social concerns and suggestions for revised regulations were drowned out by commentary that took issue with encouraging any type of immigration at all (see also Table 2). These commentators present themselves as true patriots, and display a concern with a Chinese (Han) majority identity under threat from various directions, including the state. Some refer to “immigration disasters” in Europe and North America, juxtaposing it with a “stable” Chinese society. But most dominant is

the idea that immigration is a threat for a country in which national unity is premised on a specific version of Chinese identity that foreign nationals cannot share. Many define this identity in ethnic terms, describing the regulations as an attack on a Han ethnic identity. Drawing on nationalist state rhetoric to criticize the draft, commentators argue that the suggestion that immigrants are needed for China’s development to succeed goes against the spirit of China’s national rejuvenation project, which at its core is about overcoming humiliation by and dependence on foreigners.

**Table 6.2.** Thematic analysis of Weibo comment sample

Theme	Number of posts
Ethnic nationalism	65
China’s history of humiliation	74
Criticism of state and state actors behind this policy	87
Criticism of state priorities	51
Criticism of current immigrants and immigrant policy	76
China’s family planning policies	31
China’s talent policy	21
Effects of immigration elsewhere	15
Suggestions for improving the draft	57
Simple expressions of dissent	267

Much of the most vehement criticism is directed at the state for producing these regulations. Many of the most-liked and upvoted comments posit an antagonistic relationship between the Chinese people and governing elites. They object to government claims that talent attraction policies will benefit China’s development, and argue that the regulations would primarily benefit transnational Chinese elites (“fake foreigners”). Comments express a lack of confidence in the current regime more broadly, and personal attacks on the officials who drafted these regulations in particular. Passing the regulations would be “treasonous” (卖国) – as many commentators put – and would make it “time for the country to change its ruling Party.” Some call for offline protest against the regulations on May 4, to commemorate the social movement that started on that date in 1919, in which Chinese students demanded a stronger state response to foreign influences. Some comments combine many of these ideas:

*I resolutely oppose the regulations! I cannot forget how my teacher was helpless dealing with low suzhi<sup>107</sup> foreign students! I cannot forget the immigration disasters in Europe and America! I cannot forget the insults our students suffer in other countries! I cannot forget the hardship our parents and relatives had to suffer due*

107 A Chinese concept often translated as ‘quality’, often used in contexts of status hierarchy. See also Kipnis (2006).

*to birth control policies! I cannot forget how difficult it is for children in remote mountain areas to go to school! Opening up the gate of permanent residency like there is no one living within these borders! I am here! 1.4 billion compatriots are here! As a Chinese, if it is necessary, there will be action on May 4! (Weibo, February 29)*

The online debate led to a wave of attention for immigration in Chinese media. Many of these articles provided context on the actual scale and purposes of China's permanent residency program and immigration more broadly. They featured quotes or were written by immigration experts, such as Liu Guofu, who explained in *The Beijing News* that China's immigration system lagged far behind international standards and needed urgent reform. This media commentary, across state and commercial outlets, largely provided pro-immigration arguments in response to public worries. Experts, some of whom were asked to write articles by immigration officials they knew (N-R15, 9/2020), noted the benefits a controlled increase in immigration could provide during China's demographic transition, in addition to domestic population growth, and the importance of talent attraction for economic innovation. Director of think tank Center for China and Globalisation Wang Huiyao, for instance, emphasized China's brain drain and the evidence that migrants create jobs. A state media journalist who writes they were present at a meeting with immigration policymakers on the public controversy, assured readers that China's green card will remain 'the hardest to obtain on this planet'.<sup>108</sup>

However, the P.R. debate also attracted new elite voices from outside immigration policy circles. These intellectuals tended to be more sympathetic to the anti-immigration sentiment expressed online. In a widely shared popular talk show fragment, Fudan University historian Zheng Ruolin discusses being treated differently by a publisher after they realized he was a PRC-national rather than a foreign passport holder, arguing that China still puts foreigners' rights before those of its local residents. Criminal law professor Gao Desheng argued the P.R. regulations went beyond talent attraction and constituted a 'population policy' that should be scrapped altogether. Well-known commentator Hu Xijin, who at the time edited the nationalist newspaper *Global Times*, also largely endorsed the worries expressed by online critics, writing an op-ed stating that immigration management in China had gotten too relaxed and that the population "lacking confidence that these regulations will decrease related problems."<sup>109</sup>

---

108 “独家: 关于外国人永居条例, 我们参加了座谈会” [Exclusive: We attended the meeting on the foreigner permanent residency regulations], 谁知道, March 7, 2020 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/En2oHik4MgllshCBOTSAmQ>.

109 Hu Xijin 胡锡进, “外国人永居条例, 需细化到不留可钻的空子” [Revise, eliminate loopholes in the foreigner permanent residency regulations], *Global Times*, March 1, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Jv18UaGIOP3pDnSowcKy\\_g](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Jv18UaGIOP3pDnSowcKy_g).

The impromptu “public education campaign,” as one expert called it,<sup>110</sup> had attracted unprecedented attention to China’s ‘green card’ program. A mix of grassroots and elite influencers, however, had turned it into a public referendum on the state of immigration in China.

***c. The aftermath of the P.R. debate: ‘Immigration is now sensitive’***

In the aftermath of the online controversy, immigration experts reflected on the rapid “failure” (N-R15, 9/2020) of the policy proposal, despite the draft having been seven years in the making. As one participant in the drafting process put it, the “misunderstanding” between public and state on the implications of the P.R. regulations was especially unfortunate given the level of caution policymakers had in fact taken on the issue of immigrant settlement.<sup>111</sup> This outcome illustrated just how opaque the immigration policymaking process had been. Immigration researchers themselves, even those who frequently cooperated with authorities, found that the lack of access to immigration data hindered their research (e.g. N-R9, 5/2019, S-R1, 8/2020).<sup>112</sup>

The NIA had responded to these complaints by saying that they would increase transparency, and broaden their consultative base (N-O2, 5/2019). In the years prior to the P.R. debate, it had started to increase its social media output and publish quarterly border crossings figures on its website. However, the P.R. debate showed that after decades of decision making “behind closed doors,” it would require more effort to improve public communication.<sup>113</sup> As a researcher who had worked closely with the NIA on its planning put it: “We didn’t prepare enough. Now immigration is sensitive, which means the majority view will have to be considered” (N-R5, 9/2020).

But the events also impacted the position of immigration experts in the policymaking process directly. First, there were a growing number of expert voices who started to speak out on the issue, including people without much background in immigration policy – a development that one long-standing immigration policy expert described as “very scary” (S-R4, 8/2020). Second, the public controversy reflected negatively on those within policymaking circles who had been “loudly preaching the immigration dividend,” as a proponent of more cautious reforms put it (Zhang B. 2020). Experts

---

110 Yang Jingwen 杨靖皎, “从移民治理角度思考《中华人民共和国外国人永久居留管理条例（征求意见稿）》” [Considering the PRC foreigner permanent regulations (draft for public comment) from the perspective of immigration governance], CCG, February 29, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?\\_\\_biz=Mzg5NjcxNzAzOQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=Mzg5NjcxNzAzOQ).

111 Ma Yong 马勇, “《外国人永久居留管理条例》的制定是新时代移民管理服务善治的重要里程碑” [The ‘Foreigner permanent residence regulations’ are an important milestone for new era immigration management and services], 边海境界, February 29, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bg\\_eWtOCvxBgMasXNHdFIQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bg_eWtOCvxBgMasXNHdFIQ).

112 See also Liu 2015, Zou and Zou 2018.

113 E.g. Li Qing 李庆, “如何理解中国国际人才引进的法制化需求” [How to understand China’s need for global talent attraction legal reform], CCG, February 29, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?\\_\\_biz=Mzg5NjcxNzAzOQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=Mzg5NjcxNzAzOQ).

who fit that description, such as CCG's Wang Huiyao, had been among the most vocal and well-connected among China's immigration experts. In the first years of its operation, the NIA had commissioned CCG on large-scale planning projects, in the first such public-private cooperation in immigration policy. Now, however, this cooperation was halted as a direct result of the P.R. debate, while planned medium and longer-term planning documents were to be revised (N-R5, 9/2020). In 2021, the NIA announced the establishment of its first consultative expert committee. While committee members' names were not included, the announcement emphasized that the 29 members came from a notably broad range of academic institutions and disciplines – including political science, public administration and ethnicity studies.<sup>114</sup>

Experts diverged on the significance of the P.R. debate for future immigration policy making. Some emphasized the timing of the debate, which came at the end of a period of Covid-19 lockdown, arguing that the public might have been especially anxious.<sup>115</sup> Others argued that extreme online voices should not be taken as representative of the entire population. More experts, however, took the debate as a reminder to policymakers of China's 'national sentiment,' which presented a policy reality that extended to intellectual elites and had roots in "policies, history, and asymmetrical information."<sup>116</sup> It provided further proof that immigration policymakers were highly constrained in their policy options following the issue's politicization, after previous controversy around foreigner management had already put relevant authorities in an increasingly "passive" position.<sup>117</sup> A researcher at the Central Party School, who had started to publish on international immigration more frequently in the preceding years, argued that policymakers should expect immigration to be a highly sensitive issue, as it had been globally, noting that currently both China's immigration management expertise and social understanding of immigration issues were at a low level.<sup>118</sup>

While elite actors took perceptions of public opinion as expressed in the P.R. debate as highly significant, evidence drawn from a wider cross-section of the Chinese population show a more moderate picture of public attitudes. In our July 2020 national

---

114 “国家移民管理局组建首届政策法规专家咨询委员会” [NIA establishes first advisory expert committee], NIA, March 31, 2021, <https://www.nia.gov.cn/n897453/c1399338/content.html>.

115 Liang Yucheng 梁玉成, “对《中华人民共和国外国人永久居留管理条例（征求意见稿）》的评价” [Comments on the ‘Foreigners permanent residency management regulations’ (draft for public comment)], March 1, 2020, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/knA2bxT57mmJM6b6V3Y\\_og](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/knA2bxT57mmJM6b6V3Y_og).

116 E.g. Huang Zicheng 黄子诚 and Liu Hongwu 刘宏斌, “引智引才视域下我国永久居留制度研究” [Our national permanent residency system from the perspective of attracting knowledge and talent], 广西警察学院34(4), 2021. Zhang Baoping 张保平, “《外国人永久居留管理条例》（征求意见稿）疏议” [Thoughts on the ‘Foreigners permanent residency management regulations’ (draft for public comment)], 边海境界, March 13, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/GRQtY0mrlPpdzBoUTPqUQA>.

117 Li Qing 李庆.

118 Chen Jimin 陈积敏, “十议外国人永居条例, 怎样才算为中国经济作出突出贡献” [Ten points on the foreigner permanent residency regulations], 新京报, March 5, 2020, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/HLJVuGm0bjMWrbJUcmbxw>.



survey, only 14% of respondents expressed opposition to ‘qualified foreigners obtaining permanent residency,’ vs. 49% neutral and 37% in favor. Asked to provide the number of years respondents think immigrants should have resided in China before they can qualify for P.R., the most common replies were ‘5 years’ or ‘10 years.’ Qualitative data further demonstrate the limits of taking the online debate as a reflection of wider public sentiment. In my sample of public interviews completed in the summer of 2020, slightly less than half of respondents were aware of the P.R. debate earlier that year, with 26 out of 46 interviewees saying they had not come across it. Reflecting the low public awareness around immigration policy, many asked the interviewer what permanent residency entailed, and what its benefits would be for immigrants. For the large minority who had been aware of the controversy, the P.R. debate had served as an opportunity to learn more about the issue, which most considered non-controversial in principle, as long as certain requirements were in place. Some expressed surprise at the discrepancy between the online discourse and their personal experiences. As one student put it: “It made me wonder if people I pass on the street actually hate foreigners” (J-P30).

Looking ahead at the future of the regulations, experts pointed out that the public response to the P.R. debate had made delays of the policy “unavoidable” (N-R14, 7/2020, S-R4, 8/2020). But given the centrality of the permanent residency program to the NIA’s reform agenda, many experts considered it equally unavoidable that the revised regulations would eventually be passed (S-R4, 8/2020).<sup>119</sup> Some legal specialists have argued that, as a policy touching on issues of national sovereignty, future versions of the regulations should be passed as national law by the National People’s Congress, rather than as departmental regulations. This would diversify the input process and increase public oversight. The state should respond to immigration concerns, while also recognizing the public anger related to domestic developmental issues that the debate revealed. Whatever the route, all emphasized that the public should now be considered a key player in immigration policy debate, and future proposals should be accompanied by extensive public messaging.

## 5. Discussion

The permanent residency debate demonstrates the growing importance of public opinion as a policy factor in Chinese immigration reform. Policymakers encountered surprisingly strong resistance to the proposed PR regulations, with online ‘ultranationalists’ mobilizing a large-scale public response that resulted in the regulations being shelved. The intensity of the public response, that initially *surprised* policy elites, was later largely reinterpreted as *inevitable*: the result of China’s long-term conservative national

---

119 See also Ma Yong, The ‘Foreigner permanent residence regulations’ are an important milestone.

character, the result of excess emotion around the Covid-19 pandemic, or simply the Chinese manifestation of a “global change” in immigration attitudes, in which public opinion has gotten more extreme while expert voices are sidelined (e.g. Zhang B. 2020). However, rather than taking these domestic and transnational immigration-related factors as final explanations, they can be used to interpret the Chinese policymaking dynamics that led to this exceptional outcry to this public consultation procedure – and the state’s rapid response. In this section, I discuss how the P.R. debate sheds light on the bottom-up politicization of policy issues in China’s nationalist public sphere, and the effects such politicization in turn has on state information gathering.

The P.R. debate shows how grassroots groups can quickly come to dominate public debate on a marginal policy issue, in the absence of a variety of (state) perspectives and public knowledge. Although Chinese state actors intend to guide public opinion in all policy areas, immigration policy is an example of a policy area in which they have failed to keep the public up to date on China’s policy realities and goals. With government statements on immigration extremely limited, the main source of state messaging on immigration policy can be found in state media. In these propaganda publications, foreigners are invariably presented as beneficiaries of Chinese policies, living a charmed life. While some of this content has aimed to show a more diverse view of China’s immigrant society, much is premised on the strict foreign-Chinese division in society of the high socialist era, and there remain clear editorial limits to the depiction of foreigners’ integration (Gan 2022). The lack of up to date, sanctioned guidelines on how to discuss immigration has led to situations in which state actors have been reluctant to intervene in public debate during moments of social tension related to immigrants, such as during the 2009 demonstrations by African migrants in Guangzhou, or the discrimination against African migrants, especially, during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving the state position ambivalent.

By contrast, Chinese ‘ultranationalist’ groups have been very vocal on issues of immigration. Inspired by Western ‘alt right’ groups’ concerns with a majority identity under threat, international immigration trends and refugee flows have been among their key interests, often with an Islamophobic focus (Yang and Fang 2021). In terms of domestic immigration, their sensationalist and racist coverage of African immigrant communities in Guangzhou has been influential in shaping public perceptions of the scale of African and irregular migration to China. At times, local state actors have provided official statistics to debunk rumors, such as in April 2020 when the Guangzhou government announced there were the 13652 African migrants registered in Guangzhou at the end of 2019. However, these figures are much less known than the ‘300,000’ or

‘500,000’ irregular African migrants that feature in the headlines of ‘ultranationalist’ online media – and not always trusted.<sup>120</sup>

During the P.R. debate, this discrepancy proved fertile soil for misunderstanding. In pushing their criticism of the draft in explicit anti-state messages, online nationalists rapidly turned the proposal into a highly visible ‘politically sensitive’ issue. This politicization process has been common on historically sensitive foreign policy issues, such as in the China-Japan dispute about the Senkaku islands. What stands out in the case of the P.R. debate is the fact that it concerns a relatively marginal ‘talent attraction policy’ with low public salience – that was appropriated as a symbol to criticize the state for ‘selling out’ to transnational elites and foreign interests. It fits a definition of politicization as a process in which societal groups can play a bottom-up role that can be ‘suddenly and expectedly’ amplified by a ‘triggering event’ (Van der Brug 2015: 12). In the absence of electoral politics, politicization here refers in the first place to anti-state claims that render the state vulnerable to public criticism. Given the central position of assertive nationalism to current state legitimacy, state actors are sensitive to accusations that they fail to uphold it. These policy critiques are framed through a ‘foreign influence’ lens, accusing the state of compromising on Chinese autonomy and succumbing to Westernization

As online nationalists take on a role of self-declared ‘political opposition’, relatively uninhibited by censorship, they have demonstrated an ability to become a policy factor extend beyond foreign policy to other issues on which the ultranationalist constituency forms a strong opinion. This dynamic has started to affect a range of domestic policy issues, from environmental awareness campaigns to women’s rights.<sup>121</sup> However, to what extent a policy proposal would be as directly impacted as in the case of the P.R. regulations depends on case-by-case factors such as its proximity to core regime interests, the complexity of the existing elite landscape, and authorities’ evaluation of the impact of an audience cost at that particular moment (e.g. Fewsmith and Rosen 2001, Chen Weiss 2014). In the case of the P.R. policy debate, the marginal nature of the policy area, characterized by decades of neglect that resulted in a gap between a small, technocratic policy elite and a relatively uninformed public, provided nationalists with an opportunity to rapidly dominate public debate, which due to the lack of previous controversy surprised policymakers. This type of unexpected audience

---

120 In our survey, 55% of respondents selected ‘Africa’ as a ‘top region of origin’ for immigrants in China, more than for North America (49%) or Europe (33%), despite these regions making up a much larger share of the Chinese immigrant population.

121 E.g. “China’s Rising Ultra-Nationalism Complicates Xi’s Climate Ambitions”, *Bloomberg*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-29/china-s-rising-ultra-nationalism-complicates-xi-s-climate-ambitions>; “How a Women’s Rights Law Became a Front in China’s Gender Wars”, *Sixth Tone*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1009507/how-a-womens-rights-law-became-a-front-in-chinas-gender-wars>. See also Huang (2022).

cost policymakers had to consider resulted in a highly visible hyperresponsiveness despite considerable elite consensus: shelving the law, censoring the debate, increasing other types of messaging. In this sense, the P.R. policy debate can be considered a critical case for examining this policy dynamic, which could become more important as the centralization of power makes Chinese leadership more directly accountable to public opinion.

Politicization affects the policy area in ways that can extend beyond the outcomes of a particular policy to the wider policy field. When in European immigrant-receiving countries immigration policy became a more politically contested issue in the 1980s and 1990s, the role of immigration experts in the policymaking process shifted. Policymakers became less interested in expert advice, and social researchers advising the government on immigration policy, some of who had previously played key roles, now grew more contested (Scholten 2011). Other elites came to believe that the best way to manage immigration was to reassure the public with a more restrictionist stance. The agenda-setting and mediating role of the media became more important, and public opinion polls became important policy information.

In the P.R. debate, Chinese immigration policy elites can also be seen to accept public opinion as a ‘norm’ for elites that structures their discourse (Lahav and Guiraudon 2006). The controversy emboldened more cautious elite voices, while (apart from some initial media reporting) the best-known pro-liberalization advocates – whose opinions were farthest removed from those of the nationalist critics – have been relatively silent. New policy consultation mechanisms have further sidelined these voices, in an elite diversification process that was deemed necessary for China’s immigration policy space to move forward (N-R15, 9/2020).

In the Chinese context, with its especially tight links between political and research agendas, any shift in the level of political sensitivity of a policy issue will also affect the space for research and publishing. Due to its historical sensitivity, only when China’s global engagement became more pronounced after 2000, did it become more acceptable and possible to publish research on immigration (N-R5, 4/2019; N-R15, 9/2020). In the last five years, the emerging field had been boosted by the momentum of talent and diaspora policy making and the establishment of the NIA, which professed a need for China-relevant immigration expertise. This top-down state endorsement of immigration research led to an unprecedented wave of immigration studies centers and conferences, with national-level research calls for the first time explicitly including immigration topics. However, public controversy is a key consideration in triggering censorship mechanisms, both within formal publishing and funding structures and researchers’ self-censorship.<sup>122</sup> The P.R. debate - while not the only factor – is widely

---

122 For a case study of the politics-research feedback loop in environmental studies see Goron (2018).

considered to have made conducting and publishing immigration research, including on immigration attitudes, more difficult again (e.g. S-R3, 6/2020; N-R15, 9/2020).

In this way, politicization also constrains future policy making, limiting quality information production at a time when it is especially needed, and impairing channels for policy consultation and accountability. It exacerbates the existing tension between the Chinese state's desire to simultaneously control and respond to public opinion. While China's leadership has continuously flagged the dangers of information asymmetry in government, experts in other policy areas too have warned that restrictions on knowledge production will affect experts' policy analysis "and the quality of their advice".<sup>123</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

After decades of proactively engaging the rest of the world to strengthen China's development, Chinese leadership now increasingly projects a more antagonistic relationship to the outside – especially the Western – world. An assertive nationalism rooted in historical narratives of a now strong China that has fully overcome foreign imperialism is becoming an (even) more important part of regime legitimacy, as policy drivers diversify beyond economic growth. However, these narratives sit uneasily with continuing efforts to build a well-connected, globally influential powerful country. Developing an immigration system that can attract top talent from around the world is an example of such an effort: it fits core domestic goals to build a world-class innovation economy, but also seems to contradict president Xi's more strident messages on foreign influence and national pride.

While the state has often ignored these tensions, avoiding position-taking on many aspects of globalization (Pieke and Barabantseva 2012), the proposed permanent residency regulations could be considered a small step in acknowledging the social diversity and immigrant settlement needs that come with attracting talent. As some commentators recognized, in this sense, the P.R. debate spoke to this larger tension, the question of "how our nation-state takes care of itself... within this chaotic world"<sup>124</sup> and the "identity crisis" (Tian 2021) of a rising power that struggles with its relationship to the outside world. The way this proposal was halted illustrates the challenges the state faces (and has largely created for itself) in the reform of underdeveloped policy areas with transnational components.

The dynamics that drive this policy dilemma have become more entrenched under president Xi Jinping, who has centralized power among domestic elites, while endorsing a more populist nationalist stance. In foreign policy, this has resulted in aggressive 'wolf warrior diplomacy' that has been popular among domestic nationalists. While

---

123 Vivian Wang, "How China Under Xi Jinping Is Turning Away From the World," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-world.html>.

124 Who, 'Exclusive'.

this approach for several years triggered elite debate on whether radical domestic populism can work against China's long-term interests, state leadership seems not to see any reason for changing course with the assertive foreign policy course apparently 'firmly set for the foreseeable future'.<sup>125</sup>

The P.R. debate shows how this dynamic can also affect domestic policy making in a long-term strategic area. An increasingly 'stunted' public sphere, 'in which a Chinese commentator may more safely criticize government policy from a hawkish, nationalist direction than from a moderate, internationalist one,'<sup>126</sup> is a key reason for this development. Their agenda-setting force is so significant that they crowd out wider public attitudes and are often taken for the majority view, even if it demonstrably is not. As Yang and Fang write, in the Chinese context these online groups have made right-wing populism an emerging political force, that largely developed outside institutions. The P.R. debate offers an example of how this dynamic does indeed affect policy development in surprisingly unmediated ways. At the same time, this new manifestation of popular nationalism influences elite dynamics, empowering conservative voices.

While the impact of the P.R. debate on the wider public sphere displays regime-specific dynamics of politicization and censorship, the politicization trajectory itself is strikingly similar to that in other immigration-reception contexts. As this article shows, China seems to be entering a new phase of immigration policy making, in which – like elsewhere – an initial period of limited public interest in immigration policy is followed by one in which the public demand for immigration restrictions grows (at least among some parts of the population). Despite being one of the most politically closed authoritarian regimes worldwide, in China, too, a vocal minority gains outsized policy influence following decades of largely uncontroversial immigration policymaking, with elites following suit. As interviewees emphasized: "In the way that politicians aim to balance their own interests with public opinion, China seems not so different from other countries" (N-R14, 7/2020). In immigrant-receiving nations ranging from the United States to Russia, this dynamic has resulted in immigration policymaking as a balancing act between contradicting economic and social interests, in which control-focused rhetoric is combined with 'side-door' or 'backdoor' policy openings (Castles 2004, Schenk 2018). Indeed, following the P.R. debate, NIA social media output has become decidedly more populist and security-oriented, almost exclusively focusing on the state's efforts to control China's borders.

---

125 Yun Sun, "Statement before the U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission Hearing on "CCP Decision-Making and the 20th Party Congress" Panel," January 27, 2022, [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Yun\\_Sun\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-01/Yun_Sun_Testimony.pdf)

126 Thomas Christensen, "The advantages of an assertive China: responding to Beijing's abrasive diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs* 90(2), 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67477/thomas-j-christensen/the-advantages-of-an-assertive-china>.

To a 'populist authoritarian', centralized leadership that has made itself responsible for all policymaking and output, looking responsive to nationalist segments of public opinion is increasingly urgent. Given this risk-averse policy context, under some circumstances Chinese immigration policymakers might be even more constrained than their counterparts in politically fragmented democratic settings in their ability or motivation to maneuver economically pragmatic immigration policy past the (perceived) majority. While the talent attraction agenda is unlikely to be abandoned, it remains to be seen when and in what form immigration authorities will attempt to push through the now controversial P.R. regulations. Ultimately, the attempted permanent residency reforms as well as their opponents illustrate China's integration with both globalization and anti-globalization trends. However, unlike in other parts of the world, in China an anti-immigration backlash arrived before its immigrant settlement system got built in the first place.