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

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# Conclusion

## 1. Core argument

In the course of writing this thesis, I had many conversations about the definition of an ‘immigration country’ and whether China could become one. Chinese officials would ask me how likely the migrants they were hoping to attract would want to settle in China, while migration researchers would debate whether it makes sense to describe the foreign nationals, whose lives in China are often transient and insecure, as ‘immigrants’. As a term, ‘immigration’ has connotations of permanence and is often associated with a level of immigrant incorporation that does not easily fit the situation of most foreigners living in China today. Instead, a dominant discourse views foreigners living in China as, what cultural theorist Haiyan Lee calls, “invariably sojourners,” no matter, she adds, what Chinese residence and naturalization laws might say (2014: 283). Researching China’s immigrant reception, I found that such culture-centric views can no longer do justice to the complex social positions of foreigners in China. Instead, after four decades of increasing immigration to the country in the context of its ‘reform and opening up’, the role of immigration policy needs to be part of this conversation.

This thesis has examined China’s politics of immigration in the 21st century. In this period, China became a middle-income country and a global power. In the face of developmental bottlenecks and slowing economic growth, the Chinese Communist Party has focused on strengthening the state, as well as expanding the sources of regime legitimacy and stability in addition to economic development. National Chairman Xi Jinping, in power since 2012, has promoted a narrative of nationalist rejuvenation “excluding difference” (Callahan 2015: 225) while also advancing the ambition to move China “closer and closer to the world’s center-stage” (Xi 2017). Situating China’s immigration reform against this backdrop, I asked what the case of immigration policymaking can tell us about China’s wider global-power state transformation in this period.

While a growing literature has documented the emergence of China as an immigrant destination, the factors shaping Chinese policymaking around immigration – an outcome of China’s internationalization that sits at the nexus of domestic and global state concerns – have remained under-explored. This thesis has examined key political dynamics underpinning immigration reform within the central Chinese state, local-level policy innovation and its obstacles, as well as the role of societal attitudes in immigration policymaking. The main argument it puts forward is that the treatment of China’s diverse immigrant population provides insight into internal tensions within China’s broader state strategy.

Specifically, I argue that China’s shifting governance priorities, as shaped by the CCP’s wider legitimization strategy, lead to institutional and ideological tensions in its approach to immigration. I find that China’s domestic political dynamics, as an interplay between Chinese state-building priorities and national identity discourses, are key to analyzing the mix of liberalizing and control-oriented immigration reforms the Chinese state is pursuing today. With the developmentalism of the early reform era replaced by more comprehensive state control, Chinese immigration management has shifted from informal accommodation of economic migration, especially at the local level, to strengthened enforcement of its rigid legal migration framework combined with top-down policy reform. However, I find that this reform agenda faces implementation challenges and is experiencing increasing politicization. I argue that these policy challenges activate a conservative bias in China’s immigration policymaking that also provides insight into wider issues related to the socio-cultural impact of the country’s opening up.

More broadly, I argue that when studying China’s global-power state transformation, it is important to contextualize its domestic politics within global trends of “repoliticization under late capitalism,” or the return to a politics centering collective identities in the face of structural developmental challenges (Gonzalez-Vicente and Carroll 2017: 1010). Rather than seeing the internal tensions within the Chinese state’s nationalist ambitions to build a globally competitive state as unique, I propose putting them into dialogue with political responses to the effects of unbalanced development and globalization around the world. When it comes to immigration policymaking, the case of China’s immigration reforms not only defies research assumptions about the role of political regime and a country’s development stage in migration policymaking, but also highlights the political nature of increasingly selective and security-oriented immigration policymaking worldwide.

In this conclusion, I first synthesize my main findings and then discuss their implications for the study of 1) China’s migration patterns, 2) China’s internationalization, 3) Chinese policymaking and 4) global migration politics. I end with a section that zooms out and considers the case of immigration policy’s significance for a wider audience aiming to understand a rising ‘global China’. In this final section, I also

discuss the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on China's immigration management and revisit the question of whether foreign migrants in China must remain 'sojourners' – and what role immigration reform might play in that process.

## **2. Key findings: The political dynamics of China's immigration policymaking**

My five case studies on central-level, local-level and societal immigration policy dynamics show how China's immigration policymaking is being reshaped by the CCP's wider state-building efforts in what it considers a period of economic and political uncertainty. Examining immigration reform following the establishment of China's first national immigration agency (Chapter 2), local-level policy innovation targeting skilled migrants in Shanghai (Chapter 3) and labor migrants in Guangxi (Chapter 4), as well as immigration policy attitudes (Chapter 5) and the controversial policy reform of China's permanent residency system (Chapter 6), I lay out the Chinese state's reform ambitions and some of the main constraining responses they have triggered.

On the one hand, central state ambitions to consolidate state power have made immigration policy more uniform and defined. The central state has started to acknowledge that China has become an immigrant destination country, and is dedicating more resources to developing what it now calls its 'immigration management' system. As my analysis of the establishment of the National Immigration Administration shows, long-term state aims to become a global innovation economy and an active participant in global governance have led to new goals on immigration, including increased accommodation of long-term immigration of immigrant groups deemed desirable (Chapter 2). In this vein, I find that systemwide top-down state reforms, aimed at building state capacity and increasing state control, are transforming the immigration policy area through "standardizing, specializing, and professionalizing" (MPS 2019) policy development and implementation.

As the 'foreigner management' system that had previously micro-managed foreign nationals' presence in China was largely dismantled in the 1990s and early 2000s, immigrants to China were governed by a 'exit-entry management' framework that was rigid on paper but often enforced in an 'ad hoc' or 'laissez-faire' manner (see also Brady 2003, Pieke 2011, Lan 2017, Zhang et al 2014). With economic development as their main target, local governments governed immigrants with considerable discretion, through considering local developmental needs as well as through corruption. In the 2000s, state concern with irregular foreign migrants increased. Regulatory campaigns gradually became part of immigration control enforcement, aimed at specific migrant groups, such as African traders in Guangzhou or unregistered transnational marriages in border regions, or in particular cities or regions (Barabantseva 2015, Habicht 2020, Li et al. 2012). Nationwide, however, state actors hardly framed immigration as a security threat (Chou et al. 2016). As vice-minister of public security Yang Huanning

put it in a rare speech on the state of immigration to China in April 2012, while “the growing diversity of [foreigners’] purposes and identities” were something to note, the “vast majority” of irregular migrants were simply “unaware of [China’s] national laws and regulations” (Yang 2012). In fact, national-level state actors hardly discussed the rapid increase of immigration, treating it like a non-issue.

As I show in chapters 2-4, following the adoption of China’s 2012 exit-entry law, there has been a sustained policy effort to rein in informal policy practices, and to increase the enforcement of the residency and employment regulations. In parallel, the state has developed an agenda to improve the attraction of educated and high-income (return) migrants, after its existing ‘talent policy’ was considered unsuccessful. Policy goals remained narrow: to increase the share of some desirable migrant groups, while strengthening control over irregular migration. But as my case studies on the NIA, skilled migrant reform in Shanghai and labor migration reform in Guangxi demonstrate, the reform momentum also led to formal policy reforms in areas that had lagged behind migration realities and migrant needs. These include the NIA’s commitment to more transparency and the increase in public information available, opportunities for policy elite participation in policy development, as well as policy innovation on key issues such as expanding permanent residency rights and migrant social integration, and the regularization of low-income cross-border labor.

On the other hand, however, as this thesis has shown, this reform agenda has faced considerable implementation challenges, resulting in a mix of change and continuity in the immigration policy sphere. I find that these challenges are mainly located in China’s domestic political sphere, and can be attributed to two types of tensions, 1) tensions within China’s bureaucratic system under Xi Jinping, and 2) tensions related to Chinese national identity narratives and the role of public opinion in policymaking. Together, these lead to specific challenges facing policy reform in internationalization, that I argue have intensified as China became a global power.

First, in spite of a decade of centralization, the immigration system remains highly fragmented. As I show in Chapter 2, China’s national immigration agency has been unable to take up its role as coordinator of immigration affairs at the national level, due to its relatively low-ranking bureaucratic status and bureaucratic conflict. Xi-era disciplinary governance reforms have also introduced new tensions into the central-local government relationship, which lead to a risk-averse implementation of experimental and other new policies. In Shanghai, I find that local officials choose to selectively implement new skilled migration policies, proactively implementing only those policies they deem in line with longstanding policy goals while hardly implementing those that could cause social controversy. However, all new policies are announced in ceremonies and state media coverage, leading to a gap between liberalized policy discourse and restrictive on-the-ground implementation (Chapter 3). In the Southwestern border

region of Guangxi, a policy trial regularizing cross-border labor migration has been subject to a series of securitizing adaptations that result in extreme uncertainty for migrants and their employers (Chapter 4). The tendency in this trial to prioritize security over development aims reflects a wider trend towards the strengthening of immigration control, including a build-up of border control infrastructure from a low base.

While state actors continue to pursue a variety of immigration-related goals, in the current risk-averse policy environment, my findings suggest that political incentives make it easier to implement securitizing reforms, while liberalizing aspects of the state's immigration agenda are stalled or face limited implementation. In addition, paradoxically, reforms that lead to policy liberalization on paper can be experienced as immigration restrictions on the ground due to the increase in standardized enforcement.

A second main driver of implementation challenges stems from the fact that Chinese state actors have remained ambiguous on the relationship between increasing immigration and China's national identity. In tandem with rhetoric on continuing internationalization, Xi-era leadership has also expanded the use of ideologically targeted anti-Western nationalist narratives. I find that the tension between policy discourses claiming it is in China's interest to partially liberalize immigration, and those that aim to limit foreign influence shows up throughout the immigration policy process (see especially Chapter 2 and 6). This tension reinforces a historical tendency among state actors to consider immigration a 'sensitive' policy issue. It activates conservative and secretive policy practices in an institutional context in which the difference between 'foreigners' and 'immigrants' has never been developed, and dominant conceptions of nationhood cannot easily accommodate diversity (Liu and Weng 2019, Cao 2019). With the new 'immigration' rhetoric remaining controversial within policy elites and creating "confusion and disagreement" among policy practitioners (Zhang and Yang 2022: 97), I find that the NIA adopted terms like 'immigration management' and 'social integration' without ever defining them. Despite commitments to increased transparency, the agency's long-term strategies have not been made public. In the absence of public education or open media debate on immigration, I therefore find that online nationalists have dominated social media debate on immigration, and were able to newly politicize a reform of the permanent residency system (Chapter 6). While I show that wider public views on immigration are in fact much more nuanced, policymakers consider critical public opinion a major policy factor. In the context of the Chinese political system's focus on social stability and avoiding public controversy, this increase in politicization in turn limits the space for public and elite policy debate, and strengthens the position of conservative policy voices.

Importantly, on these identity-related aspects of immigration I also identify ongoing changes. Policy elites in and outside the state draw on different national identity narratives to advance an agenda of framing immigration as a long-term governance issue. These include accounts of national and local cosmopolitan history and modernization

narratives that present further internationalization as inevitable. Meanwhile, public attitudes on immigration policy I researched are indeed characterized by a diversity of views. Whether in favor or against a more liberalized immigration system, I find widespread recognition of immigration as a long-term issue facing a more developed, powerful China (Chapter 5). Highlighting the wider internationalization of Chinese society in recent decades, members of the public make sense of immigration by combining their interpretation of wider national identity narratives with personal experiences of mobility and international exposure. Previously unstudied, this thesis also finds some evidence of low-level politicization – both in the sense of an increase in salience and emerging polarization (Van der Brug et al 2015) - of immigration policy among the wider population, especially where it concerns preferential policies for foreign nationals that are deemed at odds with China’s current development status. Likely reflecting the lack of state messaging on immigration per se, as well as the absence of reliable policy information, I identify a gap between state and societal narratives and low awareness of China’s immigration policies among the general public.

Together, my findings provide insight into the slow and multi-directional formation of China’s immigration system. While immigration to China has been normalized and mobilized for developmental aims, my five case studies foreground the political dynamics around and the (re)politicization of Chinese immigration policymaking. The reforms I have examined take place in a policy environment in which the stronger and centralizing state is more prepared and willing than in previous decades to build a more full-fledged “immigration system with Chinese characteristics” (NIA 2021). However, tensions within the current domestic political landscape, both institutional and ideological, affect how and to what extent this system can be built. Driven by a complex web of bureaucratic and other political interests, ideas about Chinese national identity, in which the position of immigrants remains ambiguous, shape the “tracks” along which China’s immigration reforms move or fail to move forward (Brubaker 1992: 17). The politicization processes I describe are entangled with longstanding bureaucratic practices and threat narratives, rooted in a dichotomous view of China and ‘the world.’ Crucially, however, they are shaped by China’s new identity as an immigrant destination that is also a global power – and share much with immigrant reception dynamics worldwide. This analysis exemplifies how immigration reform can indeed offer a privileged vantage point into wider social and political processes in China’s ongoing state transformation, especially those pertaining to its internationalization. The next sections elaborate on what these findings contribute to scholarship on migration and Chinese politics, and outlines the most pressing areas of future research.

### 3. Research implications

#### *a. Contributions to the study of China's migration patterns*

The study of immigration to China has been moving quickly since China's foreign populations started growing over 10% a year in the 2000s (Yang 2012). However, research on Chinese perspectives on this change has been relatively absent, especially at the national policy level. This thesis offers new insight into both state and societal perspectives on Chinese immigration policymaking. First, its empirical data on policy development and implementation, and on elite and public attitudes towards such policy adds to our understanding of the politics of Chinese immigration reception. Second, they also enable new comparisons with other types of Chinese migration.

In terms of state perspectives, my findings highlight a rise of immigration on the national policy agenda, as well as the limits of this reform agenda. At the local and regional level, immigration governance has traditionally varied in different areas and towards different immigrant groups (Lan 2017, Plummer 2022). For instance, some localities with higher concentrations of foreigners moved towards “partial recognition” of de facto permanent immigrants within the restrictive national policy framework (Cheuk 2019a). Previous studies have noted a decreasing space for such local autonomy (e.g. Cheuk 2019b, Lehmann and Leonard 2019). Building on this work, my thesis contextualizes this trend by analyzing the national-level reforms that lead to such policy standardization. It also offers further evidence of the growing pressure on local governments to focus on immigration control, while risk-averse implementation slows down liberalizing reforms. At the same time, my thesis documents the increased reform momentum at the national level, which includes new priorities on skilled migrant attraction and foreigners' social integration. My findings bring out the tensions of implementing a national reform agenda within a fragmented immigration system that inherits a history of public security authorities controlling the exit-entry management of Chinese and foreign nationals alike. Further research is needed on the NIA's ability to cross interdepartmental divides, on the content of local push-back, and on immigration policy attitudes among top national leadership.

The findings of this thesis on societal attitudes, too, have broader implications for the study of Chinese immigration. Building on previous studies of Chinese immigration attitudes, most notably Han (2017), I find that attitudes towards immigration selection and control policies are largely moderate. Previous studies on online attitudes have focused on documenting negative and often extreme anti-immigration sentiment. While these studies are crucial to our understanding of the emerging politicization of immigration issues, my findings among broader population samples suggest it is important not to extrapolate these findings to the general population. I find that bottom-up narratives on immigration are highly diverse and draw on a variety of national identity narratives, most notably that of China's reform and opening as a period of gradual internationalization. In the absence of public education on immigration, and



with the salience of immigration issues in public debate still relatively low, policy attitudes exist on a broad spectrum, with many also more liberal than current policy. Going forward, more qualitative and quantitative research of public attitudes towards immigration would be helpful, including of attitudes towards different migrant groups and of policy attitudes over time.

This research also suggests unexplored connections between the Chinese state's immigration reform and diaspora attraction agendas. My findings refute suggestions that the increase in return migration is the sole reason the Chinese state is starting to address long-term immigration (e.g. You 2020): the permanent residency reforms target a broader range of immigrants, foreign students are increasingly a policy target, and the emerging social integration policy is not aimed at return migrants. But as Ho (2018) has pointed out, immigrant and return migrant groups partially overlap in significant ways. I find that this partial overlap extends to the politics of governing these groups. Not only does diaspora attraction form an impetus for immigration reform, return migration contributes to the politicization of immigration policy. Notably, the public opinion backlash to the permanent residency reforms extended to former Chinese nationals (who were considered part of a transnational elite and, among other things, referred to as 'fake foreigners'). State discourse on Chinese emigration, which for decades had been largely "de-coupl[ed]" from politics (Xiang 2003: 22), is once again becoming more political, with Xi Jinping emphasizing the geopolitical purpose emigrants could serve rather than their developmental role (Liu 2022a, Liu 2022b). Future research might consider how security-oriented, populist domestic politics is affecting emigration and diaspora policy and their implementation. It would also be useful to gain further insight into the overlap between immigration and diaspora policy development, for instance with regard to policy consultation and lobbying. More broadly, as the development strategy that underpinned all China's fragmented exit-entry reforms changes, we need more research on how that affects different migration flows and their governance.

Finally, across state and society, I document an on-going shift in mindset that is making space for immigration as a long-term issue in Chinese society. This is itself an important finding, given the prevalent research emphasis on the temporariness of immigration to China (Niu 2018, Camenisch 2019, Cheuk 2019b, Lehmann and Leonard 2019). This shift is also palpable in the development of Chinese migration studies. While diaspora scholar Li Minghuan already wrote in 2005 that the state of international mobility in China "far exceeded the traditional focus of the field on overseas Chinese" (2005: 46), the last decade saw the emergence of a more complex immigration studies field made up of researchers working on diaspora studies, Chinese internal migration, public security and border studies across a range of social science disciplines. Many of these researchers are return migrant, emigrants and immigrants themselves. In mainland China, I find that the institutionalization of this new field is also affected by shifts in the politics around immigration. Considering its potential for

advancing theories of Chinese migration, both the transnational field's growth and its obstacles would benefit from further documentation and analysis.

### ***b. Contributions to the study of China's internationalization***

The politics of China's immigration policymaking, I argue, also speaks to a wider repoliticization of the 'international' in Chinese policymaking. Throughout the reform era, Chinese leadership maintained a conflicted stance towards the widespread global exposure its opening up strategy brought about, with leaders continuously monitoring its socio-political impact (e.g. Roberts 2018). However, within a developmentalist governance framework, international engagement that could contribute to that goal was relatively depoliticized. As governance priorities rebalance, how does this affect state attitudes towards internationalization? My findings in this thesis provide insight into two aspects of this question: 1) changes in state and societal perceptions of China's position in the world, and how they relate to policymaking, and 2) the decline in informal policy practices as a space for internationalization.

As my thesis shows, policymakers face a complex domestic political context as they develop and implement immigration reforms. I find that the Xi-era tension between establishing China as a global power while reinforcing an exclusionary nationalism leads to a more controlled and narrow internationalization agenda. In this environment, I even reforms that fit this agenda can be easily politicized and stalled. Like Gonzalez-Vicente (2011) in his study of state involvement in Chinese overseas business expansion, in the case of immigration policy, I find that, on the one hand, individual state actors are themselves "internationalizing" and "exposed to a greater range of cultural encounters" (410) as they discuss international immigration experience and policy scenarios with experts, thinktanks and deepen China's engagement in international migration organizations. At the same time, however, they face another set of incentives, shaped by the priorities of their leadership, that lead them to be risk-averse and avoid seeming too 'pro-foreign', for instance in debate on whether China needs an immigration law. More widely, restrictions on overseas travel or experience living or studying abroad within the bureaucracy have also become more common.<sup>127</sup> Future research might explore how different parts of the state cope with this unresolved tension as they pursue internationally oriented goals, for instance in higher education or climate cooperation, or how it affects cooperation with international organizations.

This thesis also contains new data on China's societal internationalization that complicate a straightforward 'repoliticization' narrative. While popular nationalism is important to policymakers' risk assessment (see also section 3.c), my findings also

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127 Liu Guofu 刘国福, "略论我国出入境管理法未来的重要转向" [Brief discussion of an important change of direction in the future of our exit-entry management law], presentation at 第3届国际移民学术论坛, 中国人民警察大学, December 24, 2022.

suggest that we need to go beyond nationalist discourse to more fully understand the impact of internationalization on Chinese society. Although the ‘China-foreign’ binary remains prevalent in popular discourse, this does not mean that Chinese perceptions of the foreign stayed stable or underwent only cosmetic shifts, as some accounts have suggested (e.g. Huang 2021). My findings on public immigration attitudes (Chapter 4), as a relatively non-politicized issue on which state positions are not well-known, reveal bottom-up changes in Chinese self-Other perceptions. They show how Chinese attitudes towards the world are shaped not only by nationalist narratives, but also by decades of positive internationalization narratives and experiences, including the study of foreign language and culture, international mobility and so on. The growing confidence respondents express about China’s status in a (commonly referred-to) global power hierarchy, and the salience of perceived immigrant privilege as a symbol of previous inequalities, fit with other literature on ‘Sino-centric’ globalization and Chinese views of other parts of the world (Farrer 2019, Lan 2022, Kefala 2022). Rather than reducing these findings to the product of state propaganda and ethnic nationalism, I suggest that we need a more sophisticated understanding of the variety of Chinese discourses, critical and otherwise, on internationalization and its effects.

In addition, my study calls for renewed attention to both the formal and informal practices of internationally oriented policy reforms. To understand today’s centralizing immigration policy environment and its bureaucratic tensions as described in my Shanghai and Guangxi case studies, it is important to contrast the current trend towards more rigid enforcement and securitization with the lower enforcement levels and informal policy practices that characterized much of the previous, more decentralized decades. In previous scholarship, the emphasis has often been on the temporary crackdowns on irregular migrants (‘三非’), rather than on the wider context in which widespread “nonrecording” in immigration control (Lan 2017: 51), high levels of discretion and corruption in the visa industry (e.g. Zhang et al 2014, Zhang et al 2018), and local state tolerance of immigrant associations for which there was no legal basis (e.g. Ma 2019) were arguably the norm. While in this thesis I was unable to give an in-depth overview of immigration policy implementation since the 1980s, like the formal visa and permit systems enabling incoming mobility, these informal practices were crucial to the development of China as an immigrant destination and fit with existing work on the importance of informal practices in China’s gradual and segmented opening up (Shirk 1993, Zweig 2002, Zhou 2022).

Since the late 2000s, the rebalancing towards societal control and national security in Chinese state strategy has limited state tolerance for such ‘grey space’ in its societal governance. This intersects with the growing capacity of the state to exercise control, through its strengthened bureaucracy at different levels of government. In the immigration policy field, this has been palpable through the more strictly enforced visa systems as well as in the recent adoption of nationwide digital databases, for instance

of foreigner residence registrations (see also Haugen 2019). To understand the on-the-ground impact of these shifts, it is crucial to go beyond formal policy change. For immigration policy, this has meant that even liberalizing reforms, such as allowing foreign students to start businesses, are not perceived as liberal by migrants who were used to a lack of enforcement. As a more state-controlled approach to internationalization is being codified in regulations that police the contact of Chinese individuals, officials, NGOs, media and universities with their international counterparts, social scientists might document these changes, and keep an eye on the potential persistence of local discretion and informal implementation practices on the ground. Finally, this more tightly controlled approach also raises a question about the limits of the state's ability to shape internationalization: while the increase in the Chinese state's capability to regulate has allowed it to increase its 'infrastructural power' as a facilitator of mobility and exchange (Xiang 2016), when does (over)regulation shut those processes down?

After four decades of China being a key player in globalization, it seems important to place current Chinese discourses on international exchanges and resistance to them in both a historical and a comparative perspective. More insight into the internationalization dynamics of the preceding decades of reform, in which China was not yet a global power and deepening global integration was the top priority, can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of reform era internationalization. Meanwhile, comparative study of authoritarian-style controls on internationalization, including of societal attitudes towards it, can further contextualize these Chinese trends.

### ***c. Contributions to the study of Chinese policymaking***

Besides contributing to the study of China's internationalization, this thesis also brings new insight to the question of how Chinese policymaking at large is changing in the Xi Jinping era. How do the centralization drive, a rebalancing towards security, and intensified nationalist rhetoric affect policy development and implementation? In particular, the study of immigration policy in this thesis exemplifies the wider challenges of increased top-down steering for policy innovation, and the policy impact of China's increasingly restrictive information environment as an outcome of censorship and other political control measures.

The impact of an on-going centralization of power on China's famously localized policy development model has been an issue of interest the study of Xi-era policymaking. Existing scholarship has documented a decline in experimental policymaking in the 2010s (Chen and Göbel 2016, Heilmann 2018, Teets and Hasmath 2020). At the same time, a top-down formal commitment to policy innovation remains in place, with Heffer and Schubert (2023) finding that the increased central steering capacity at the top in fact results in higher pressure on local authorities to deliver new policies. However, so far less has been known about the on-the-ground implementation challenges policy innovation might face in this centralizing policy environment.

The two case studies of local-level policy experimentation in this thesis contribute new empirical material on this point. First, they highlight the variety of policy experimentation that continues to take place. While in the Chinese context, experimentation always takes place in the context of state hierarchy (Heilmann 2018), I find that the development of the Guangxi regularization trial fits in a tradition of bottom-up policy experimentation in which local governments propose a new policy that gets approved at a higher level. As the trial developed, the regularization of Vietnamese workers was securitized due to top-down pressure within the bureaucracy, arguably shifting from a ‘proposal-approval’ to an ‘instruction-execution’ model - to use the categorization of Shi and Frenkiel (2021). By comparison, the skilled migration reforms in Shanghai’s national development zones represent a more top-down approach to policy development in which new policies are rolled out nationwide after a trial period in designated locations (“instruction-execution”). Second, for both cases I find that these new policies are implemented in a risk-averse manner. This finding strengthens a growing body of literature on the way local governments mitigate higher levels of surveillance through a selective mix of compliance and performativity (e.g. Tu and Gong 2022, Zhou 2022).

Overall, my findings suggest that policy experimentation is becoming more of a tool for the diffusion and enforcement of centrally approved policy than for bottom-up innovation, as also Ma and Pang (2017) find in the (since terminated) policy area of direct local elections. However, the case of immigration policy reform also shows that local governments continue to push back on top-down reforms, as exemplified by the local resistance within the exit-entry management apparatus against a vertical roll-out of an immigration management bureaucracy. Future research might look at these central-local negotiations in more detail, to gain more insight into the limits of centralization as president Xi maintains that a balance between “top-level design and practical exploration” remains a top priority (Xi 2023). Given the important role of Party-building in current centralization efforts, it would also be good to gain a more detailed of the Party-state dynamics shaping these implementation decisions at the local level (see also Snape and Wang 2020).

In addition to its contribution on Xi-era policy implementation, this thesis also provides insight into the role of the Chinese information environment in shaping current policymaking. In particular, the analysis of the swift state response to the permanent residency regulations (Chapter 5) showcases the continued importance of nationalist public opinion as a policy factor. While this has been studied in depth for foreign policy making, the study of immigration policymaking adds to findings that suggest a growing “tension between market-driven grassroots patriotism and state-led patriotic campaigns” (Zhang and Ma 2023: 1) across policy areas. It also adds evidence to the idea that a more centralized leadership might actually feel more exposed to public pressure and in response take a populist stance (Gries and Wang 2021, Chen Weiss 2019).

Furthermore, the case of immigration policy shows how the increasingly censored public sphere can result in new policy vulnerabilities for the state. In the absence of a publicly disseminated immigration strategy, state messaging on immigration remains propagandistic and detached from societal realities (Gan 2020, Huang 2021). Meanwhile, commercial and political incentives overlap to make aggressive nationalism “a defining component of online public discourse in China” (Schneider 2022: 16), while wider civil society voices on immigration remain very weak (Lu et al 2020). While my research into wider immigration attitudes suggests politicization for now remains limited, the dominance of nationalist anti-immigration rhetoric on the Chinese internet is clearly a shaping factor in public and policy debate on immigration. Similar “dissonance between the official rhetoric and social discourse” has been found on the issue of China’s foreign aid (Wang and Cooper 2022: 15) and refugee policy (Song 2014), with online nationalist public opinion dominating public debate in both cases. Despite the state’s strengthened control over the information environment, these dynamics suggest that the tensions characterizing governance of sensitive issues has affected the state’s ability to both gauge and manipulate public attitudes on these issues. The ensuing cycle of politicization I describe feeds into what others have described as a growing risk of ‘echo chamber’ politics in the Xi Jinping era (e.g. Zhao 2022).

Adding to calls to research the role of digital technology in shaping Chinese policy (Schneider 2022), future studies might further explore the relationship between online and offline public attitude formation. How is aggressive online nationalism shaping nationalism on the ground? How does ‘online public opinion’ as a policy factor relate to other public opinion channels, such as street protests? The role of the wider Sinophone sphere in China’s online information environment, or the transnational dimensions of the nationalism shaping Chinese domestic policy debate, also merits further research (Zhao and Fang 2022, Wan 2022). As Yang and Fang (2022) note, while the political influence of online ultranationalists might be growing, many of their alt-right discourses traveled “across borders and across the Great Firewall”. Finally, while this thesis focuses on state perspectives, we also need more research looking into what Tu (2022) calls the “human cost” of opaque implementation and information environment for migrants and others affected.

#### ***d. Contributions to the study of global migration politics***

In its aim to “read” the Chinese state through immigration (Xiang 2016: 671), this thesis has built on a literature on how migration policy and the nation-state co-constitute each other (Torpey 2000, Hollifield 2004, Xiang 2016, Natter and Thiollet 2022). While doing so, this thesis has also laid out some groundwork that can benefit further comparative study of the Chinese immigration state. So far, the Chinese case has been largely missing from comparative scholarship on migration politics, while China-focused studies are

rarely comparative (policy-oriented work forms an exception, see for instance Chou et al 2016, Lin and Shen 2022). The Chinese state has emphasized the unique nature of its governance challenges, and the need to develop an “immigration governance system with Chinese characteristics” (NIA 2021). This study, however, finds that the politics of Chinese immigration shares significantly with that of other places, perhaps more than would be expected based on existing scholarship emphasizing the importance of categories like developmental status or regime type (Nawyn 2016, Natter 2023). At the same time, the specifics of the Chinese case that this study uncovered can contribute to on-going discussions in the field on the role of regime type and development in immigration policy.

For part of its reform era, China could be perceived as somewhat of an outlier in its immigration policy, with policies “not designed in response to perceived threats, but in line with economic reform” (Chou et al 2016). My thesis shows how this has since shifted, with China’s immigration policymaking and its challenges increasingly reflecting regional and global trends. In particular, its policy agenda has moved towards more migrant selectiveness and a growing concern with migration control, aided by instruments that aim to integrate ‘desirable’ migrants while keeping others temporary (de Haas et al 2016). Like in other East Asian countries, its policy agenda remains narrow and focused on economic (return) migration (Seol and Skrentny 2009). In addition, as for many other ‘latecomers’ to immigrant reception, most studied in the European context, I find that a period of relatively depoliticized, technocratic policymaking has been replaced by gradual politicization in which public opinion becomes a prominent policy factor (Scholten 2011). In China, too, authorities are taking a passive stand towards migrant integration, while competing economic and political interests have led to multiple and contradictory immigration goals (Castles 2004). Overall, then, China’s immigration policymaking displays the “haphazard” and “reluctant” approach that has characterized immigration policymaking around the globe (Hollifield et al 2014).

At the same time, the Chinese immigration management system, as it develops in an authoritarian context in 21<sup>st</sup> century East Asia, does not easily fit existing research assumptions. First, it defies a prominent assumption that migration policy reform in authoritarian regimes would be fundamentally different from that in democracies, in which policymakers balance a range of political, economic, legal and diplomatic interests (Hollifield 2004). This study contributes to a growing literature exploring the complex drivers of migration policy in non-democratic settings, many of which are shared across regime type (Natter 2023, Thiollet 2016, Schenk 2018). The Chinese case especially highlights the role of domestic politics, in particular bureaucratic politics and public opinion, as factors constraining its authoritarian immigration policymaking. My findings on the role of the Chinese information environment fit, for instance, with research on Russian migration politics that similarly finds the state vulnerable to anti-immigration public opinion, and taking up “functions which are undertaken by

far-right parties under democratic rule” (Malakhhov 2014: 1074). At the same time, the Chinese system’s selectivity and low immigration levels, especially of labor migration, distinguishes it from authoritarian countries like Russia, Singapore or the Gulf states. Future research might explore to what extent patterns among – but also beyond – these cases exist. For instance, comparative studies could explore the role of business interests and courts in immigration policy, or of immigration reforms that are part of broader authoritarian modernization projects (see also Natter and Thiollet 2022).

Second, regional comparison provides further evidence of the need for nuance in using regime type as a lens for understanding China’s immigration policymaking. Like in its democratic neighbors Japan and South-Korea, China’s emergence as an immigrant destination has been closely linked to its rapid economic development. China’s demand for immigrants might be compared to that in Japan before the 1980s, when it had no need for labor migration and most of its economic migration consisted of ‘white-collar’ professionals (Chung 2014). In the following decades, Japan and Korea liberalized the immigration system less than might have been expected based on their liberal economies, implementing piece-meal reforms under civil society pressure rather than moving towards broadly accessible settlement rights. So far, China’s immigration system has been even more selective, as even high-skilled foreigners in the country face limited options for long-term settlement. My findings suggest that the Chinese state aims to move to a model resembling that of its neighbors, but that even liberalizing its immigration system to that degree will be difficult, given the political sensitivity of permanent residency reforms I describe in this thesis, and the lack of political space for civil society activism.

I also find evidence of a similar institutional culture driving immigration reform across these neighboring countries. In particular, Seol and Skrentny’s (2009) analysis of immigration policymakers in Japan and South Korea’s developmental states – who stick to the economic priorities they know, while being less attentive to the socio-cultural changes that come with development – has explanatory power in China. While some point to general cultural claims on ethnocultural homogeneity (which as Chung mentions tend to be contingent and flexible) comparing East Asian immigration regimes, these specific and somewhat limited policy repertoires are more likely shaped by “interactions between recent immigration and existing institutions” (Chung 2014). Without sufficient internal or external pressure to reform, this developmental approach can lead to a ‘reverse discursive gap’, in which policy discourse is more liberal than implementation (Kim 2015, or see Freier and Acosto 2015 for a similar mechanism in Latin-America). In China, this is most prominent in state media discourse on the country’s immigration policies, which makes these seem more generous than the actual policy environment. However, the examples of Japan and Korea also suggest that these policy cultures can adapt, for instance in Korea’s relaxation of naturalization requirements and restrictions on dual citizenship.



Third, the Chinese case also contributes to the theorizing of immigrant policy in the so-called ‘Global South’. In particular, my findings contribute to other studies aiming to correct the assumption that migration primarily driven by economic and informal processes signals a ‘weak’ state (Nawyn 2016, Thiollet 2019, Van Dongen 2021). As Chinese policymakers turned to international mobility as a developmental tool, they took on a regulatory role that, at least to some extent, intentionally included informal practices. With its current drive to increase control through formalizing and standardizing policy processes, the Chinese state is moving away from policy ambiguity as a strategic tool (Norman 2017, Natter 2022). I show how this embedding of migration reform in broader state-building trends has a big impact on the functioning of the migration state, even when policies do not change on paper.

Finally, the case of China’s immigration policymaking can contribute to an ongoing discussion on global migration regimes beyond Hollifield’s liberal migration state (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019, Van Dongen 2022, Natter 2023). In addition to expanding previous categorizations, such an effort also points to unexpected similarities in how states deal with foreign nationals in the current nation-state system. While China’s illiberal regime would in theory enable it to engage in top-down reforms as it wishes, state actors often end up constrained. Rather than a balance between the “logic of markets and the logic of rights” that characterizes policymaking in the liberal migration state (the ‘liberal paradox’) (Hollifield 2004: 886-7), for Chinese authorities, policy gaps often derive from the tension between the logic of development and the logic of political control and stability. Further theorization of the Chinese migration state, and the mix of “nationalizing, developmental and neoliberal” logics it applies to its management of emigration, diaspora and immigration, remains necessary (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019: 853). On the surface, China fits the global trend towards what Boucher and Gest (2018) call a politicized ‘Market Model’ of immigration management. However, these global trends ‘land’ in vastly different immigration systems, from the expansive ‘settler-state’ or European apparatuses to China’s bare-bones framework. It raises the question of what building an immigration system can look like in the current (anti-globalization) moment.

#### **4. Wider implications for public and policy debate**

This thesis has focused on the Chinese state and its approaches to immigration policymaking. However, centering state perspectives also carries clear limitations. First, by analyzing state policy aims and processes on their own terms, researchers of migration policy risk appearing to think ‘for the state’ and to naturalize or even endorse the state’s migration agenda by thinking within its policy categories (e.g. Schinkel 2018). In this thesis, while I have aimed to maintain an analytical distance from the policy agendas discussed, I have not always been able to include critical reflection on their terms and aims. Second, given the paper-based format of this thesis, I generally

did not have the space to put my insights on these state perspectives into dialogue with actors beyond the scholarly debate.

In this final section, then, I draw on my findings to critically discuss three sets of issues with wider relevance to foreign migrants in China, external media or policy observers, as well as Chinese migration policymakers. First, I discuss the role of immigration policy reform and activism in the debate about the possibilities for long-term integration of foreign migrants in China. Second, I look at China's strict pandemic border restrictions, and how they affected the dynamics described in this thesis. Finally, I outline some take-aways from the case of immigration reform for the wider debate on how to respond to China's global rise.

### ***a. Does China have immigrants?***

In the forty years since China reopened its borders to international mobility, a highly heterogeneous group of foreigners has arrived in the country. Analyzing cultural products from the 2000s, Lee (2014) offers insightful analysis on these migrants, who no longer could be captured by the previously polarized categories of invaders and sympathizers, friends or foes. Instead, these foreigners could even be framed as helpful participants in the articulation of a new cosmopolitan Chinese identity. And as 'sojourners', their "inevitable departure" (2014: 278) helped offset the anxiety these newcomers might produce.

To what extent does the 'sojourner' or '过客' trope remain a useful lens for understanding the incorporation – or lack thereof – of foreign nationals in China today? I would argue that it can certainly help illuminate the impermanent presence – chosen or imposed – of many foreigners in the country, and their often precarious life conditions. However, thinking of foreigners in China as inevitably transient also obscures the complexity of China's current foreign migrant population and its needs. Describing this population as 'immigrants', the globally dominant term for long-term incoming migrants, or 来华移民 in Chinese, can highlight this diverse group as a part of Chinese society with its own rights, duties, and policy demands.

In this thesis, I show how the Chinese state approaches foreign migrants as a developmental resource. Resembling what Chung (2017), discussing Japan, calls a situation of 'immigration without immigrants,' the Chinese state now recognizes the country as an immigrant destination but avoids calling foreign migrants 'immigrants'. This reflects a persistent state of exception, in which foreigners do not fit the Chinese Communist Party's static map of the Chinese nation (Pieke and Barabantseva 2012). From the fact that foreign nationals are discussed in an appendix of China's national population census to public services that are only accessible with a Chinese ID-card, the institutional incorporation of foreigners has not been a state priority. Interestingly, a prominent strand in the literature on migrant experience in China also focuses on utility, highlighting how economic migrants, often from Euro-American origin, use their time

in China for personal or professional development without the intention to settle (e.g. Camenisch 2019).

Within this shared frame, in which foreign migrants and the Chinese state extract mutual benefit for developmental purposes, the need for more immigrant-centered reforms might not be obvious. In addition to the restrictive visa policies, migrants themselves point to the limits of cultural integration (“a foreigner cannot become Chinese”) to explain why they are transient (e.g. Carrier and Mathews 2020). Instead, the best immigrants can do is build up temporary belonging, which often manifests as membership of a locality (Farrer 2019). There is also evidence to suggest that migrants are deterred by political trends, such as the focus on reducing foreign ideological influence and tighter control over academic research, or events like the high-profile detention of two Canadian migrants, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, who were imprisoned from 2018-2021 as part of a US-China trade war dispute (Pieke et al 2019, Jakes 2021).

However, migrant incorporation in today’s China is in fact much more diverse and often does not fit an elite developmentalist framing. Similar to China’s internal migrants, many of whom have settled in cities while state policy and popular discourse continued to see them as temporary (e.g. Zavoretti 2017), many foreign migrants have carved out long-term lives for themselves. Centering those migrants who start a family in China, whether from developing or developed countries, makes this the most clear. However, for the growing number of foreign spouses in China, permanent residency requirements are often very difficult to fulfil (Barabantseva and Grillot 2019). Among economic migrants, case studies show that many also “intend to stay,” at least initially (Cudic et al 2023: 10, Huang 2019), or end up staying unplanned (Cheuk 2022). The staff at Shanghai’s permanent residency center, too, told me that many enquiries come from long-term third-country migrants and former Chinese nationals who are interested in but do not qualify for permanent residency. Like elsewhere, migrants move to China without detailed knowledge of the immigration policy system, and its limitations can come as a surprise.

Despite often having been neglected, both in and outside academic discourse on immigration to China, immigration policy change is a crucial aspect of the discussion on immigrant belonging. It is impossible to know what the development of immigrant communities in China would have been like if policies so far had been more immigrant-centered, allowing a decoupling of employment and residency rights for long-term migrants, letting migrant spouses work, or supporting students to stay (see Pieke et al 2019 for more concrete policy suggestions). But rather than assuming that, no matter how open or closed China’s immigration policies, its culture would remain largely resistant to immigration, I would argue that outcomes would be considerably different, given how immigration policy, migrant settlement choices, and wider immigrant reception culture mutually shape each other (e.g. Fitzgerald 1996).

This thesis has outlined some of the challenges facing a public conversation in China on the way in which “immigration reshapes the face of the nation, resulting in a different ‘we’,” (Fitzgerald 1996: 8) - from a central state evading debate on issues of internationalization and diversity to a censored public sphere. At the same time, that does not mean nothing is changing. New Chinese narratives on immigration have emerged that draw on historical and comparative repertoires. These include often-cited nationalist calls to kick out ‘foreign trash,’ but also the police academy administrator citing Tang dynasty immigration levels to emphasize the long history of immigration in Chinese society, or the diversity of public attitudes I found in this thesis (see also Tian 2021). While critical public opinion is indeed a policy factor, no simple assumptions should be made about the Chinese public’s attitudes towards foreigner settlement. Like Sullivan et al (2022), who found broad support for naturalized non-ethnic Chinese athletes among Chinese football fans, my findings suggest broad support for wider access to permanent residency. With unitary or essentialist views of Chinese identity often not borne out by public opinion research, it is important to unpack evolving ideas about citizenship and ethnic/cultural/civic identity among the Chinese public: i.e. someone can be in favor of permanent residency or naturalization for immigrants, without considering them culturally ‘Chinese’ (see also Han 2022). Perhaps this means that, with more public education and transparency on the scale and nature of foreign migration to China, immigration authorities would be unlikely to face widespread resistance to the next draft of the permanent residency regulations.

The fact that immigrant and civil society voices have been kept marginal in Chinese policy debate is a major setback in this context. Without pathways to citizenship, and faced with the state’s suspicion of foreign political interference, immigrants have been kept transient, suspended in a position that make advocacy very challenging (Xiang 2017). But some actors have long been pushing for more inclusive policy. This group – that includes long-term China-based immigration researchers, parts of the transnational diaspora, foreign business associations, international migrant organizations and immigrant community representatives – and their role in advancing policy change requires future study (e.g. Liu 2015, Liu and Van Dongen 2016, CCG 2018). As the NIA expands its mechanisms for legal reform and public consultation,<sup>128</sup> I hope that they will take up their long-standing suggestions, including, for a start, 1) the regular publication of national immigration statistics that clearly distinguish long-term residents from short-term visitors, and, more ambitiously, 2) expanded access to permanent residency, in tandem with dismantling the remaining *hukou* restrictions limiting residency rights for internal migrants (Chan 2021). My research in Shanghai suggests that state-led social organizations serving immigrant needs, while no replacement for independent

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128 “移民管理法治研究基地在京成立” [An immigration management legal development base was established in Beijing]. NIA, February 27, 2023. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bENLT2OxKn6Z8SIXES2uSw>

civil society, would also be useful in improving state-migrant information flows if they were made more widely accessible.

Given the processes of repoliticization described in this thesis, such dialogue on immigrant incorporation is unlikely to become easier going forward. But, writing this in the Netherlands, a country in which official acknowledgment that it had become an ‘immigration country’ in the postwar era was “highly controversial” for decades (Hollifield 2014: 17), it seems important to note that reception (policy) cultures take time to change. In that sense, describing China’s foreign resident population as immigrants can be considered aspirational for a system that acknowledges and accommodates their integration into Chinese society much more than the current one does.

### ***b. Immigration and the Covid-19 pandemic***

For the China’s immigration trends described in this thesis, the Covid-19 pandemic was a major disruption. When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, China was the first country to be severely affected. In the following years, the country developed a ‘zero-Covid’ crisis management approach that included stringent border controls keeping out most foreign nationals. Many of the restrictions, which decimated international border crossings, stayed in place until late 2022, much longer than in most other countries. During these years, in Western media, a narrative emerged that, the pandemic had provided a convenient excuse for the Chinese state to reduce immigration and to thereby further limit the internationalization of Chinese society. With international mobility again highly policed, was China ‘closing off’ once again like in the Mao-era? Experts spoke of a country “dangerously locked off” in which Xi’s nationalist agenda could accelerate without resistance.<sup>129</sup>

This thesis shows how such an interpretation does not accurately reflect the Chinese state’s priorities on immigration. Like in other countries around the world, the Chinese immigration framework pursues a range of sometimes conflicting development and security aims (Castles 2004). The border restrictions, part of a high-intensity crisis approach to keep Covid out, went against other key state goals that remained salient, such as the goal to attract and retain more high-skilled immigrants or to deepen ties with diasporic communities. Still, the question of how three years of radically reduced immigration affect the politics described in this thesis remains. Here, I reflect on how China’s ‘zero Covid’ years sped up a trend towards securitizing migration but did not radically alter state priorities, while at the same time, the crisis measures have severely disrupted migration trends.

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129 Scott Kennedy, “Xi-Biden Meeting May Help End China’s Destructive Isolation,” *Foreign Policy*, November 14, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/14/xi-biden-meeting-china-isolation/>; Lai-Ha Chan, and Pak K. Lee, “How Nationalism and Xenophobia Drive China’s ‘Zero Covid’ Policy,” *The Diplomat*, December 1, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/how-nationalism-and-xenophobia-drive-chinas-zero-covid-policy/>.

Many of the dynamics in this thesis were put on display during the first years of the Covid-19 pandemic (Speelman 2021). Following the closure of China's borders to most foreign visa-holders on March 28, 2020, described by an NIA spokesperson as an "unfortunate, temporary restriction",<sup>130</sup> the agency's regular policy announcements raised its profile among the general public. Building up border security infrastructure and controlling irregular migrants became a priority in China's border regions, where the NIA also expanded a forced repatriation system. This trend was subsequently codified in a new Land Borders Law adopted in October 2021. Like in other parts of the world, the first months of the pandemic saw a rise in hostile attitudes towards and discrimination of immigrants, reinforcing images in global media of the Chinese public as predominantly xenophobic. The NIA's investment in communication resulted in some multilingual information services directed at immigrants. Overall, however, pandemic measures, from vaccination campaigns to pandemic management apps, regularly excluded foreign nationals. Finally, when growing numbers of Chinese nationals protested the persistent restrictive border measures in the fall of 2022, they were accused of being supported by 'foreign forces.'<sup>131</sup>

To many in and outside China, the country's strict border restrictions, outlasting those in other parts of the world, felt symbolic of the larger political closing that has characterized the Xi-era. The reappraisal of the Ming dynasty 'closed country' policy by one party historian was seen as a sign of the times.<sup>132</sup> However, when it comes to immigration, such a narrative of targeted and intensifying closure risks conflating several distinct developments. As this thesis has shown, the pre-pandemic immigration agenda was characterized by increased enforcement of selective immigration regulations, but also by a gradual expansion of rights for some migrant groups. These efforts – expanding permanent residency access in some cities, opening immigration service centers –continued after the border closures.<sup>133</sup> A widely cited pre-pandemic decline in the number of expatriates from Euro-American and East Asian countries in cities like Shanghai was accompanied by an increase in migration from other parts of the world (Pieke et al 2019). In addition, rather than seeing the instances in which migrants were excluded or unnecessarily singled out in Covid measures as evidence

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130 “国务院联防联控机制新闻发布会：介绍依法防控境外疫情输入最新情况” [Press Conference of the State Council Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism: Introducing the Latest Measures for Preventing Virus Importation from Abroad]. March 30, 2020. [www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/30/content\\_5497281.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-03/30/content_5497281.htm).

131 Xiao Zibang, and Jing Li, “China Envoy Blames ‘Foreign Forces’ for Covid Protests.” *Bloomberg News*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-15/chinese-envoy-says-covid-protests-smacked-of-color-revolution>

132 Verna Yu, “History revisited: What the isolationist Qing dynasty tells us about Xi Jinping’s China. *The Guardian*, January 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/16/what-the-isolationist-qing-dynasty-tells-us-about-xi-jinpings-china>.

133 See for instance Zhang Bin 张斌, Dong Yixin 董易鑫, and Wang Ji 王妃, “是外国人但不是外人”浙江金华创新外国人服务举措” [‘Foreigners not Outsiders’: Jinhua, Zhejiang Innovates Foreign Service Measures], 中国侨网, October 5, 2021, [www.chinaqw.com/jjkj/2021/10-05/309751.shtml](http://www.chinaqw.com/jjkj/2021/10-05/309751.shtml).

of increasing xenophobia,<sup>134</sup> I find that they are best interpreted as typical blind spots in China's longstanding non-inclusive policy culture. While the treatment of foreign nationals during China's pandemic response illustrates how far the Chinese state has to go in terms of immigrant incorporation, it does not seem to depict a deterioration.

Instead, a more likely scenario is that the needs of foreign nationals (like those of many other domestic and diasporic groups) were considered collateral damage in a rigid and top-down but ultimately temporary crisis response. As China abandoned its zero-Covid policy in late 2022, its immigration agenda has emerged largely unchanged. Importantly, these years seem to have further tipped the balance towards control measures being implemented more rapidly than other reforms (see also Zhang 2022). The pandemic surveillance has also increased the state's use of big data in immigration governance (Zhao and Wang 2022). State framing of immigration has undergone some further securitization, with central policymakers now referencing national security and geopolitical competition as the rationale for a stronger central immigration apparatus (e.g. Lin and Shen 2022). These changes are important given the role crises play in state centralization (Jiang and Ong 2023). The announced policy agenda, however, continues to revolve around attracting more skilled (return) migrants and controlling irregular migration, with a focus on "system building" (Hu 2022). Indeed, given my findings on the state's narrowing but long-term internationalization strategy, these policy priorities are unlikely to be abandoned in the coming years.

However, the pandemic border restrictions have severely altered the migration context these policies aimed to shape. Reliable figures are limited, but it is clear that large numbers of long-term foreign residents left the country between 2020-2022. With the residency rights of most of these migrants linked to their employment, they will face a high threshold to return. Cross-border labor flows have been disrupted for years, while China's emerging reputation as an important student migration destination has been damaged by its refusal to let degree students (re-)enter the country during these years. Among the Chinese population, including many returnees, a popular discourse of emigration (润学) once again depicts China as a place to leave. While the issue of how Chinese attitudes towards immigration changed during this period requires further research, many reports suggest that foreigners once again became an unusual sight on the streets of major cities, with one American scholar noting that their reception during a rare trip in Fall 2022 reminded them of the 1980s.<sup>135</sup>

As a crisis event, the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened some on-going trends in China's immigration management but has also had a major disruptive impact on

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134 E.g. Amanda Florian, "China's Zero-COVID Policies are Stirring Xenophobia," *Foreign Policy*, November 7, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/07/china-zero-covid-xenophobia/>.

135 Han Bochen, "Being there: American researchers extol benefits of returning to China." *South China Morning Post*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3201156/being-there-american-researchers-extol-benefits-returning-china>.

foreign communities in the country that was the result of contingency. In fact, these years illustrate how both the Chinese state narrative of the ‘inevitable increase’ of foreigners living in China as the country becomes more powerful, and the ‘inevitable downturn’ narrative that has dominated Western reports are too simplistic. Rather, with immigration to China experiencing periods of growth and decline, what the next decades will bring is still highly uncertain.

### ***c. Immigration reform and China’s global rise***

Finally, the case of China’s immigration reform offers some take-aways for policymakers and observers of its global rise. These concern the need to critically assess how immigration to China is being framed in geopolitical narratives, especially in the context of US-China competition, to include detailed knowledge of Chinese domestic realities in political and media debate on China, and to cultivate a perspective that does justice to China’s entanglement with the rest of the world.

Previously not a major dynamic, as the rivalry between China and the US becomes a long-term feature of global politics, both countries are viewing their immigration policies through a more geopolitical lens. For the United States, despite its outsized leadership role attracting Chinese and other skilled migrants, retaining Chinese talent is now considered a growing strategic priority.<sup>136</sup> In China, its long-term developmental ‘talent attraction’ strategy is now also being adjusted to fit a new geopolitical competition frame (e.g. Gao 2019). While the majority of Chinese students abroad return, efforts to attract (back) experts in STEM fields have been mixed (Zweig et al 2020, Zwetsloot 2021). Immigrants and diaspora groups are particularly vulnerable to such connections between migration and geopolitics. So far, the scrutiny of ‘China-connections’ in American research has led to discrimination and criminalization of participants in Chinese talent schemes, as well as an increase in anti-Asian racism (Lewis 2021). For instance, in response to the U.S. accusations, the Chinese state erased its flagship ‘Thousand Talent Program’ from government websites, leaving participants in a vulnerable position (Lu et al 2022). As this dynamic spreads,<sup>137</sup> an accurate understanding of these programs, as well as of China’s skilled migration more broadly, is critical. As my case study of skilled migration reform in Shanghai demonstrates, the ability of China’s immigration

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136 E.g. Caroline Coudriet, “Congress mulls immigration’s role in China competition strategy.” *Roll Call*, May 16, 2022, <https://rollcall.com/2022/05/16/congress-mulls-immigrations-role-in-china-competition-strategy/>.

137 E.g. Frank N. Pieke, “China’s influence and the Chinese community in the Netherlands,” *Leiden Asia Centre*, March 2021, <https://leidenasiacentre.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Chinas-influence-and-the-Chinese-community-in-the-Netherlands-F.N.-Pieke.-Machine-translation..pdf>; Hannah Devlin, “1,100 scientists and students barred from UK amid China crackdown.” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/15/1100-scientists-and-students-bared-from-uk-amid-china-crackdown>.



system to accommodate ‘foreign talent’ remains limited. Meanwhile, an unstable geopolitical environment negatively affects immigrants on all sides.

China’s steep demographic transition is another topic on policy agendas around the world. In many countries, demographic pressures have formed an impetus for immigration reform. In China, where the transition has been sped up by decades of strict family planning policies, this is so far not the case. During my research, I have found that, when immigration policymakers discussed future demographic trends, they consider an explicit labor immigration policy politically unviable given uneven economic development in the country and China’s recent past as a country defined by its large labor population. At the same time, there has been movement in related policy areas, such as reforming the foreign employment framework to accommodate some forms of ‘low-skilled’ foreign migration, increased local recognition of foreign marriage migration in rural areas with gender imbalance, or allowing regional solutions for labor shortages such as the Guangxi cross-border labor trial. The topic is also gaining traction in academic discourse, with more experts calling for immigration policy to be integrated in the country’s transition strategy (e.g. Ye and Jing 2019, Liu 2022). While China is unlikely to embrace immigration as a major component of its demographic policy, in the future we could see more indirect ‘side-door’ immigration measures to relieve demographic pressures (see also Chung 2021).

More broadly, as countries around the world are developing new China policies, these should be based on a realistic assessment of China’s political aims and abilities. In the case of immigration policy, we have seen how difficult it is for Chinese state actors to deliver on the immigration reform goals they set themselves, despite the authoritarian state being increasingly powerful. While foreign discourse on China tends to take Chinese policy rhetoric at face value, knowledge of its policy constraints is crucial to avoid policy that battles an idea of China that does not exist. For instance, as Liu (2022: 20) notes in the case of diaspora policy, while the Chinese state aspires to utilize the diaspora in its geopolitical ascendance, the “intensity and efficacy of these transborder connections” is far from clear. Like this work and that of others on the domestic political economy foundations of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and wider foreign policy (Ye 2020), this study of immigration highlights some of the institutional and ideological limitations that affect much of China’s ‘external’ policymaking.

In addition, this thesis cautions against generalizing about the Chinese population based on online attitudes. In the current environment of tense diplomatic relations with China, journalists and scholars make summary statements about xenophobia being at “a new high” or “on a scale not seen since the Cultural Revolution” that are impossible to verify (e.g. Shirk 2022, Ang and Martin 2023). Going beyond the internet, contrasting observations can often easily be found. For instance, as one of the only US journalists still reporting from mainland China in 2022 noted, while official barriers and online hate towards her work had increased in recent years, offline interactions throughout

the country remained unchanged and “really friendly” (Feng 2022). In this context, studying the range of offline attitudes, as this thesis has tried to do, is crucial to a more nuanced understanding of on-the-ground realities.

Ultimately, it is understandable that ‘China exceptionalism’ remains a common framing both in and outside the country due to the extraordinary scale and speed of its reform era development, including that of human mobility. However, the case of China’s immigration policymaking is well-suited to debunking this idea. From the size of its immigration flows – significant but far from extraordinary – to its globally common policy tools, priorities and anti-immigration discourse, a critique of China’s immigration policymaking invites zooming out. Doing so can illuminate the larger reality of what Franceschini and Louberere (2022: 58) call the “intensification of Chinese entanglements in the global system” and the need to understand linkages, parallels, ruptures, continuities and evolutions, as well as the broader forces shaping them. This thesis has attempted to do so for just one aspect of China’s past decades of intensive and transformative international exchange – of people, information, ideas, institutional practices – that took place through a multitude of channels. Any movement towards undoing (‘decoupling’) or deepening these connections takes place in that entangled context.

