Chinese Attitudes Toward Immigrants: Emerging, Divided Views

From discrimination against Africans due to COVID-19 fears in the city of Guangzhou to the impact of tensions between Beijing and Washington on Americans in the country and the expulsion of foreign journalists, news on foreign residents in China has been grim this year. The New York Times concluded that levels of xenophobia in the country are "alarming."

While recent developments are indeed worrying, not much is known about views on immigration among the wider Chinese public. A national online survey on immigration attitudes, the first of its kind and designed by a team of Shanghai-based social scientists, of which I was a part, gives insight into Chinese citizens' perceptions beyond media controversies.

Answers to our survey reveal a public more welcoming of migrants than might be expected based on media reports, with a majority in favor of expanding or maintaining current levels of migration. It also points to an emerging politicization of foreign migration among urban, highly educated parts of the population. While the prevailing sentiment among the Chinese public is moderate, as immigration becomes a more permanent part of Chinese society, related debate rises on the public agenda, revealing parallels with global trends in immigration discourse.

For decades a large source of emigrants, China started attracting growing numbers of foreign nationals in the 2000s. United Nations figures estimate about a million foreigners lived in China in 2017, a big increase from about 150,000 registered foreigners at the start of the millennium – although a fraction (about 0.1 percent) of China's population. South-Korea, the U.S., and Japan were the most common countries of origin among China-based migrants in the most recent census data from 2010, followed by Southeast Asia and Western Europe. While incoming migration was initially dominated by foreign professionals and traders, student and marriage migration are on the rise. Foreign migrants in China are usually temporary sojourners, rather than long-term immigrants, as gaining permanent residency or Chinese nationality remains very difficult.

Existing research documents local-foreign interactions in Chinese cities with higher concentrations of foreign migrants, as well as — at times strong — anti-foreign sentiment on social media. But no regular public polling on the subject takes place, and survey research on public attitudes to foreigners so far has been very limited.

Among our nationwide sample, 33 percent of respondents answered that the number of foreign migrants in China should further increase, versus 25 percent who answered

that it should decrease by a little or a lot and 42 percent who preferred the status quo. Compared internationally, these figures suggest relatively low levels of anti-immigration sentiment. In Japan, a country that like China has no tradition of immigration, 23 percent of a national sample supported an increase in migrants, while in Eastern Europe, where immigration levels are generally low as well, a majority, when polled, wanted a decrease in immigration. In Gallup's Migrant Acceptance Index ranking attitudes in 140 countries, China holds a mid-ranking position, a few spots below Singapore.

On the effect of foreign migrants on the country's development, just over half of our respondents answered that they think immigration benefits China's development. This outcome fits with that of a 2018 Pew survey of 18 countries around the world, from the U.K. to Russia, in which 56 percent of respondents on average in all countries responded that immigrants made their country stronger. Compared to those countries, however, in China far fewer (9 percent vs. 38 percent in the Pew survey) respondents consider immigrants to be a burden. This may reflect the influence of official discourses crediting the role of foreign expertise and internationalization in the country's development.

Chinese respondents, like many of their Western counterparts, show some preference for migrants with high education levels, from countries more developed than their own. They are positive about foreigners' contribution to cultural life and economic development, but are more worried about crime and employment. In our survey, respondents care more about migrants obeying the law and holding stable employment than about language and cultural skills. However, the share of people that profess to be neutral on these matters is high as well, likely reflecting the views of relatively disengaged parts of the population, who do not hold strong views on immigration issues but also do not necessarily see it as a problem. As elsewhere, age and education level are relatively strong predictors of immigration attitudes, with younger and more educated groups being more positive about immigration.

While most respondents express moderate views, put together with earlier data, our survey also reveals that anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise in the last five years. Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), which have included sporadic questions on immigration attitudes in their China surveys starting from the 1990s, show that anti-immigrant sentiment drops in the 2000s, reaching much lower levels than in the 1990s, before increasing again over the last five years. For instance, in the WVS Wave 7 data, published in July of this year, 26 percent of Chinese respondents select "foreigners" as a category of people they would not want living next to them, vs. 13 percent in 2013.

Views among the highly-educated are increasingly polarized. While in earlier surveys, Chinese respondents with university education were clearly more in favor of immigration, in recent years this group seems more divided. In our survey, the numbers of university graduates that prefer a reduction in immigration and those who prefer an increase are both substantial (25 percent vs. 35 percent). In the latest ABS (from 2015-2016), about twice as many Chinese university-educated respondents preferred a reduction in immigrant inflows, compared to those in favor of an increase.

To our knowledge, the saliency of immigration issues, or their relative importance among public concerns, has so far not been formally studied in China, making it difficult to identify trends. But in our survey, 55 percent of respondents say controlling immigration is a higher or much higher priority for China than it was 10 years ago. This percentage is higher in places with more foreigners, like Shanghai (77.5 percent) or Beijing (66 percent). Despite the low percentage of foreigners within China's total population (about 0.1 percent), 33 percent of respondents answer that to them the number of foreigners in China feels "high," and to 9 percent it is "extremely high."

In a country of China's size, where many people (in our survey 57 percent of respondents) have no experience of personal interaction with any foreigners, media narratives on immigrants can be relatively influential. Our respondents think Africa is the second-largest supplier of immigrants in China, after Asia. This likely reflects the impact of a long-standing hype in Chinese media around the scale of African communities of traders in Guangzhou. Exaggerating the sizes of streams of migration deemed to be problematic is a common trope in media coverage of migration. In fact, official figures show that immigrants from Asia, Europe, and the Americas far outnumber African migrants.

These findings suggest a rise of immigration as a socio-political issue – in a context of relatively low politicization of immigration in the public sphere so far. Unlike in the U.S. or Europe, where immigration is perceived by large parts of the public as one of the top political issues facing their country, incoming foreign migration has so far been a marginal phenomenon in China's rapid socio-economic transformation, which includes large-scale internal migration and emigration but – at least in numbers – much more limited immigration. Even the term "immigration" is hardly associated with foreign nationals living in China, whose stay is assumed to be temporary, which is why in the survey, we spoke of "foreigners in China" rather than of "immigrants," a term usually reserved for Chinese nationals emigrating abroad.

The mechanisms behind these trends need further research. The relatively fast increase in the size and diversity of foreign communities in China, contradictions

within Chinese official narratives promoting internationalization while denouncing "foreign influence," and social media debate influenced by Western anti-immigration discourse, likely all play a role in activating public interest.

As global media headlines also reflect, Chinese attitudes toward immigration are growing more diverse, and include the type of polarized and often racist online debate that can be seen in many places around the world. However, the parts of the Chinese population that express neutral or positive views of immigration to their country outweigh its critics. This group is less visible in online debates, which focus on controversies and which in China are slanted toward nationalist discourses. Qualitative research is needed into the reasoning behind these more moderate attitudes. Given China's trajectory as an emerging immigration destination, debate on immigration is likely here to stay.

The survey discussed was developed by the "Transnational Migration" sociology research group at East China University of Science and Technology led by Prof. Yuqin Huang and the author. It was funded by East China University of Science and Technology. While not statistically representative, our online sample (1888 completed questionnaires) is diverse in terms of age, education level, region, city size, internal migration experience, and international experience. It approximates characteristics of China's overall online population on key variables like education level.

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