

**A Strategy of Restricting Immigrants? Assimilation Policy and Immigrant Integration of
China**

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Abstract

Few studies have been conducted to examine immigrant integration in China. This is because the number of immigrants is rather small and nearly invisible compared with the voluminous native-born population in China. In this chapter, we argue that the Chinese government's absence in the integration policy is a deliberate strategy that could help limit the number of immigrants. As a result, the national goal of immigrants can just focus on attracting foreign-born super-talent group for its economic and technological development without jeopardizing the conflict of the intergroup relationship between native-born and immigrants for competition of limited resources as well as racial/political/ideology discrepancy. Although this strategy has met the needs of China in the past decades, there is an increasing need for the development of integration policy due to the increase in the size of foreign-born population, as well as China's integration with the international communities on handling immigration and their integration in the host countries.

Introduction

Previous literature show that China's migrant integration and assimilation process has predominantly focused on internal migration, given the large number of people involved and its significance in both migrant and non-migrant's life (Liu, Tan and Chai, 2020; Lin, Wu and Li, 2020; Wang and Fan, 2012; Wang, Zhang, and Wu, 2016; Wissink, Hazelzet, and Breitung 2013). In contrast, little attention has been paid to immigrant integration, that is, immigrants from other countries to China. As a result, there is also a dearth of literature discussing the integration or assimilation policies toward immigrants in China. One of the important reasons is that the number of immigrants is rather small compared with its native-born population in China. It was until the 2010 population census that China started to include the foreign citizens in its data collection for the first time. Based on statistics from the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), there is about one million foreign-born population in China. In contrast, the U.S. has more than 50 million foreign-born population, despite that its total population is less than one fourth of China's population. This makes China one of the countries that has the smallest share of immigrants in its population.

There was a debate on why China has such small proportion of immigrants. The demand and supply perspective argues that China does not have a labor shortage due to its huge size of population and its own advantages of meeting various labor forces demand. Given its own large labor supply and the fierce labor market competition, it is difficult for immigrants to locate a job in China. People who are more interested in the geopolitical aspects argue that authoritarian politics are less attractive to immigrants, because the political system is more like a push factor to push people out than pulling people in. However, in recent years, there is an increasing size of immigrants and illegal immigrants in China, showing that China could potentially become a

hotspot destination for international immigrants. Despite that these perspectives do not contradict each other, another important explanation could be due to the deliberate control of immigrants by the Chinese government. Despite all countries having deliberate control policy for immigrant entry (Week, 2008), China may be one of the countries that have the strictest control in terms of admitting immigrants. Based on the Chinese government's visa policy, only a selected high-talent group who can meet the national development demand can stay legally in China for an extended time, and the chance to change into permanent resident status is very slim for any immigrants. In particular, China institutionalized a state-centered national identity, so that potential immigrants lack opportunities for a long-term immigration pathway (Choe, 2006; Low 2016).

In this chapter, we argue that it is the Chinese government's deliberate strategy by offering little opportunities for immigrant integration and assimilation in Chinese society. It is one of the integrated parts of its immigration policy by limiting the opportunities for immigrants' entering, settlement and naturalization. Socially, although some immigrant group may enjoy some privileges as depicted in the debate of "super-national citizenship" in China, such as being popular in dating market and being kinder treated when foreign-born people interact with Chinese institutions (Wang, 2021), it is more a cultural gesture to treat a "guest" than being willing to integrate them into part of Chinese. Their channel of becoming naturalized citizens is nearly none given the traditional social norm of nationalism. Immigrants' loyalty to China will always be questioned and they lack opportunities getting into State-owned sectors. On the other hand, strict controlling policies on entering into China are applied to lower skilled immigrants, and working visas for foreign students to avoid the competition of resources and job opportunities, making the immigrant integration and assimilation nearly entirely absent in China.

However, despite the apparent benefits to avoid economic competition between immigrants and natives for Chinese citizens, as well as for protection and concerns of national security, lacking the immigrant integration policy may also threaten China's competitiveness in attracting diversified talent immigrants from the global market. In the long-term, this may have a negative impact on China's economic and cultural development.

Theoretical Background on Immigration Assimilation and Integration

In 2019, 271 million people were counted as living outside of their countries of birth, and the number of immigrants worldwide has doubled since World War II (McAuliffe, Khadria and Bauloz, 2019.). Different theories have been used to explain why there exists the large flow of immigration. Economic theories tend to explain it as a response to the labor market supply and demand of both the sending and host countries (Borjas, 1989), while cultural theories emphasize the cultural similarity which connects people migrating across countries (Fischer and Massey, 2000). In contrast, social network theory emphasizes the influence of prior immigrants on the continuation of the flow for the immigrants (Hooghe et al., 2018). There are also macro level theories which explain migration from world system theory (Massey, 2015), arguing that the world market has been developing and expanding into a set of core nations and a set of peripheral nations. Core nations are those with capital and other forms of material wealth. Periphery nations include essentially the rest of the world, which has become dependent on the core, as the core countries have entered the peripheral countries in search of land, raw material, labor, new consumer markets as well as their cheap labors. This dynamics has connected the world together and migration is a natural outcome of economic globalization and market penetration across national boundaries. The world theory has been one of the significant theories

which explain why the migration flow is from the less developed countries to more developed countries after World War II, while it was the opposite case during the colonial era.

Due to the large flow of immigrants from the less developed regions to more developed countries after World War II, the immediate issues these host countries face are the integration of these immigrants in the host countries. The earliest theory about the assimilation and integration was developed by Simons (1901), arguing that the assimilation is a process of adjustment and accommodation which occurs between immigrants and native-born population. The final goal of immigrant assimilation is a higher level of group homogeneity and making a chemical compound. This theory has been further developed due to the change of immigrant composition in the more developed host countries over the past a hundred years, and many renowned scholars have contributed to the refinement of the assimilation theories (Park and Burgess 1924; Young 1939; Duncan 1933; Gordon 1964; Shibutani and Kwan 1965; Portes and Zhou 1993; Alba and Nee 1997). All the variety of assimilation theories are discussing how immigrants can better fit into the host societies and how to deal with the relationship between the host countries and their sending countries.

However, in the past few decades, global economic development and structure may have changed the previous global division of the so-called core and peripheral nations. The global economic development engine has been moving wave after wave over the years due to the shift of manufacturing. The east Asian economy has experienced rapid development since the 1970s. The first development miracle started in Japan, then followed by the four “little dragons” including South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore in the 1980s and 1990s. In the past two decades, China has taken over to become the most important economic development engine in this region. In 2010, aggregate real gross domestic product (GDP) in terms of purchasing

power parity (PPP) of China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan surpassed that of both North America and the European Union (Aoki 2012). Nevertheless, despite their significant share of the global economy, by far immigration has not become a significant social issue in these countries, particularly in China. In these countries, one of the common practices is the barriers of obtaining citizenship and pathway toward permanent residents, as priority has been given to immigrants who share the same ethnic descent and super talents who can contribute to the national development projects (Draudt 2019).

The Evolving of China's Policy on Integration of Immigrants

Unlike America, China has never been an immigration country, despite historically minority invasions to the central areas of China, and eventually those newcomers become similar to Han Chinese despite their power in the political regime, and there is no concept of immigrants vs. native born residents. In terms of citizenship, it wasn't clear until more recent centuries. The law of blood has governed the Chinese citizenship regime since the Qing dynastic era (1644-1944) (Low, 2016). As a result, it is extremely difficult for foreign people to obtain Chinese citizenship due to the high naturalization barriers, and dual citizenship is also discouraged and constrained (Low, 2016). Moreover, birth in China alone does not mean citizenship status if one does not have blood connection with Chinese. Therefore, historically China has never had urgency or priority in inclusion of immigrants. Under *Jus sanguinis*, China's rationale of its immigration policy is to maintain its population homogeneity by preventing Chinese from emigration and being naturalized in foreign countries (Shao, 2009). In the Qing dynasty, the law imposed a ban on naturalized citizens on serving in public administration sectors, as well as a very strict policy on admitting naturalized aliens. As a result, foreign-born residents in China tend to be treated as temporary immigrants.

After the dismantling of the Qing dynasty and prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the country was constantly on wars, so blood lineage has been important for identifying who is Chinese. Therefore, the principle of blood lineage has remained in guiding the nationality rule of China. It was not until 1980 that the People's Republic of China started to formulate a new nationality law, when China started its open up policy with one of the purposes of attracting highly skilled Chinese and business persons with an ethnicity-Chinese origin. During this period, the economic open and reform initiatives' goal is to modernize and develop the country at an accelerated pace. However, due to the disruption of the Cultural Revolution in high-education in 1960s and 1970s, China was in a significant shortage of highly skilled talents and those knowing the "hows" of doing business. Therefore, the government paid lots of attention to mobilizing its overseas Chinese to help with the economic reform and modernization of China. As a result of this, citizenship status has been opened up to ethnicity Chinese with foreign citizenship and privileges, and more rights have also been granted to Chinese citizens who live in other countries (Bolt 2000; Thuno 2001).

The 1980 Nationality Law departed significantly from its predecessors' nationality principles, and contained eighteen articles to align with its socialist system (Ginsburgs 1982; Low 2016). Naturalization is made eligible to those who meet one of the following conditions: 1) they are close relatives of Chinese nationals, 2) they have settled in China, and 3) they have other legitimate reasons. The article does not spell out the period of residence required, nor define the degree of kinship required to be considered as a close relative and indicate what constitutes 'legitimate reasons'; thus, it grants broad discretionary powers to the Ministry of Public Security in the case by case situation (Chen 1983). Therefore, despite that there are more room to gain naturalized citizenships in China under the new law, its main goal is to attract talent

overseas Chinese, which is similar to the historical practice that blood lineage continues to be emphasized in its practice. Therefore, there is little need for the government to make any effort to integrate these people into Chinese society due to their same ethnicity and cultural root.

Moreover, for most ethnic Chinese with foreign citizenship who invested in China or provided their expertise needed for the modernization of China, they have few or no intention to get permanent residency or Chinese citizenship. So few cases of naturalization happened after the law was established.

At the turn of the new century, China joined in the World Trade Organization (WTO). It then started to use permanent residency to attract foreign investors, professionals, scientists and engineers from other countries. China pledged to reform its entry and exit procedures to provide a systematic and transparent permanent residence system (China Daily 2001). Its main target is to attract those well-established overseas Chinese students to return to China. With the permanent residence system, China can avoid not only dual citizenship but also diplomatic conflicts over overseas Chinese. Such a move also increases its international competitiveness in the international labor market for the super talent groups (Choe, 2006). However, this scheme has attracted few non-Chinese ethnicity foreigner, part of the reasons is that the bar for the permanent residency is extremely high. The number of non-Chinese ethnic foreigners who have been granted the green card is fewer than 100, although some 600,000 overseas people work in China (Xin hua News Agency 2001).

Overall, despite the fact that the Chinese government has been active in attracting the super talent group to work and serve for China, the principle of blood lineage still dominates the process.

China's Unwillingness to attract Immigrants

When a country makes its immigration policy, it often has one of the following considerations. The first consideration is to adjust the population age structure to ensure there is sufficient population in the labor force to ameliorate the negative consequences due to population aging, as population aging brings challenges to the labor force supply and negatively affects the economic competitiveness (Zeng and Wang, 2014). Despite its relatively lower GDP per capita rank compared to its overall GDP ranking, China has been one of the fastest growing aging populations in the world. The population of people over 60 years old in China is projected to reach 28% by 2040, due to the longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates. However, China is not in an urge to admit immigrants from other countries to fill its labor force. In 2020, China's labor force amounted to approximately 783.9 million people (Tong, Liu and Gong, 2022; NBS, 2022), which is the highest number in the world. Moreover, given its different economic development level and population age structure across its provinces, its internal migration can fill the labor shortage, in particular the low skilled labors in its more developed region such as Yangtze River Delta and The Greater Bay Areas, the two most important economic engines in China. Therefore, despite rapid population aging, there is no high demand for immigration to China to fill its labor shortage.

Second, since the 1990s, the expansion of higher education and government investment in education has largely increased the stock of highly skilled talents for China. In 2019, there were 40.02 million students across the country enrolled in one form or another of higher education. The total number of students currently enrolled in a higher education program went up 4.8% to 2.864 million, an increase of 132,000 over the previous year. Among them 424,000 were studying for Doctoral degrees and 2.440 million for Master's degrees. The number of students currently enrolled in an undergraduate program in regular higher education institutions (HEIs)

went up by 7.1% or 2.005 million to 30.315 million, while those enrolled in adult HEIs went up by 13.1% or 776,000 to 6.686 million (MOE, 2019). Therefore, there is a large surplus of highly skilled laborers in China. Moreover, unlike some more developed countries that have demand for certain labor forces such as healthcare workers for the United States, there is no such demand in China given its comprehensive and diversified education and job training program in China. As a result, it seems that the only motivation for China to attract immigrants is the extremely super talents to contribute to China's science and technology, as well as enterprises competitiveness. There is also a hidden demand of female marriage migrants, which the public is not willing to provide overt support to. Due to the high sex ratio at birth, there is a high level of gender imbalance in China's population structure, for the relatively poor men in the rural area. Therefore, human trafficking has become the main channel to bring the less developed countries female migrants to China.

The Composition of Immigrants and Integration in China

Despite the strict border control and there was more emigration than immigration in China, the booming economy in China has provided various opportunities for international immigration. China's immigrants in general can be classified into the following groups (Han, 2017). The first group is the super talent groups who often possess the high-level skills that China needs, or the high-educated businesspersons. As one of key players in the international economic system, processing the super-talent group is one of the most important factors for China to maintain its strength and make it stand out in the talent labor market. The second group is university students who have been attracted by the Chinese government to study in China with an aim to boost China's influence and soft power in other countries, especially in the countries along the Belt and Road Initiatives. The third group of people are low skilled people, and there is a large group of

them from African countries, and many of them are over stayers. The fourth group is female marriage migrants, who often come from Southeast Asia countries by human trafficking and are forced to get married with poor Chinese men in rural area.

Given the deep influence of blood lineage in its citizenship identity, the assimilation and integration of immigrants are controversial in China. Due to its huge size of emigration, especially overseas students who pursue higher degrees in foreign countries and many of them obtained foreign citizenship in other countries. Therefore, there are debates about the “brain drain” and “brain gain” issues. Due to the brain drain, inflow of foreign laborers and Chinese emigrants as returnees become very appealing for China (Tai and Truex, 2015). Moreover, the population aging and the steep decline in the growth rate of its labor force intensify the appeal of foreign workers. However, Chinese residents have ambiguous feelings toward integration of these foreign people. However, although national development strategy welcomes Chinese returnees and foreign talents, there is competition between local trained scientists/professionals and immigrant scientists/professionals on the resources and promotion opportunities. Sometimes political loyalty could become an important consideration. However, overall, these super talent immigrant groups are the privileged groups in China. If they are of Chinese ethnicity, then there is little concern for their integration. For non-Chinese ethnicities, they often come for economic gain and enjoy privileges in their life standard and social circles based on their work, and Chinese governments and those highly skilled talent lack the intention to integrate into Chinese societies. The integration issues exist mainly among other groups of immigrants, and we discussed them below.

Development of the relevant policies / Laws on immigration

Given the historical focus on finding a balance between maintaining the blood lineage and increasing the competitiveness to attract the talent groups at the same time, there is a lack of consistent and concrete laws and policies for attracting and integrating immigrants in China.

First, due to government deliberate control in its immigration, there was very limited policy at the national level to promote immigrant integration even after the reform and open period in the late 1970s, since it is expected by both the government and the immigrants that their stay in China is temporary. As aforementioned, the 1980 Nationality Law was quite general and vague about the criteria of naturalization and lack of details on any related procedure. Combined with the lack of interests of those who immigrated to China during that time period, integration through the pathway of naturalization was rare. As for granting permanent residence, it was not until 2004 that *Regulations on Examination and Approval of Permanent Residence of Aliens in China* was promulgated by the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which represents the formal implementation of the permanent residence system in China. According to Article 6 in the regulations, foreigners applying for permanent residence in China shall abide by Chinese laws, be healthy, have no criminal record and conform to several specified conditions. We can see from specific conditions that the requirements are quite high for the main applicants: the foreigners need to have “major and outstanding contributions to China or needed urgently by China”, or to have stable direct investment no less than 500K US dollars for at least three years in a row, or to assume higher level posts (at least deputy general manager of plants or associate professors at higher education institution) for more than four years in a row. Such a regulation led to the dilemma that those who would like to apply for the permanent residency are hard to meet the requirements while those who are qualified usually do not have

strong motivation to apply for it. As a result, less than ten thousand applications were approved ten years after the regulation was promulgated according to official statistics.

It is probably due to the small number of foreigners with permanent residency, there has been no laws or regulations in China addressing the rights and obligations of permanent residents for a long time period. Only in 2012, twenty-five central governmental departments jointly issued the *Administrative Measures for Entitlements of Foreigners with Permanent Residency in China*, specifying that foreigners who hold a China permanent residence permit are entitled to the same rights and obligations as Chinese citizens. These rights do not include the political rights and other special rights and obligations excluded by laws and regulations. However, at the same year, strict policies with harsher regulations on illegal immigrants or immigrant workers without permission were also implemented and the Exit-Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China was adopted, which systematically addressed the issues of exit, entry, stay, residence, expulsion, and refugee status of foreigners.

For the purpose of increasing China's international competitiveness and better managing the immigrants, China began to reform its permanent residence system in 2015, including relaxing the criteria for foreign technical talents applying for permanent residence and simplifying the application process for high-level foreign talents. In 2016, General Offices of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the State Council published the *Opinion on Strengthening the Administration of Permanent Residency Services for Foreigners*, calling for improving the institution building on the management of immigrants and providing better services to permanent residents in China to attract more foreign talents and promote the social and economic development of China. After the opinion was issued, a series of measures to facilitate the application of permanent residence were rolled out, especially in major cities like

Beijing, Shanghai and provinces with large numbers of immigrants such as Guangdong and Fujian.

In 2018, the National Immigration Administration (NIA) was formally established, with one of the major duties being the management of various issues related to immigrants and permanent residents in China. In 2019, the NIA issued *Twelve Measures to Improve Immigrants and Foreigner Entry/Exit Services*. Those measures not only make more foreigners eligible to apply for visas or residence permits valid for long-term stay (up to 5 years), but greatly relax the criteria for foreigners to apply for permanent residency in China. In addition to those eligible according to the 2004 regulations, foreigners who have been working in China for more than four years with an annual salary income of at least six times the average salary of the previous year earned by urban employees in the same area; or those who have doctoral degrees; or those have worked continuously for four years in key development regions of China are now all eligible to apply for permanent residency in China. Their foreign spouses and underage children could file applications together with them.

In February 2020, the NIA and the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) jointly issued the *Request for Public Comments on the Regulation of the People's Republic of China on the Administration of Permanent Residence of Foreigners*, which intended to further relax the criteria for foreigners to apply for permanent residency in China. However, within days of the publication of the draft of the regulation, strong voices concerning that lowering the criteria would lead to large increase in the number of immigrants competing for local economic resources and the possible super-national treatment implied in certain articles of the regulation were widely heard from law experts, professionals, and netizens in China. So NIA and MOJ had to quickly issue a statement emphasizing that this regulation is still in draft process and they will carefully study the feedback

from the public and won't promulgate it in the short term. Since then, no official report about the progress of this regulation has appeared.

Future Development

In the past few years, due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, China has set strict travel bans not only for foreign tourists, but also for overseas Chinese who do not hold Chinese passports.

Although working visas are still being granted, the zero-tolerance of COVID associated with the lengthy quarantine period and frequent COVID-testing have largely limited its entry of new immigrants. Since it is not an urgent concern of the government, there is little discussion about the changing of the immigration law and integration of immigrants. The pub opinion has started a discussion on whether China will gradually return to a "Close-door Diplomatic Policies of China" like a century ago.

However, the global economic linkage has connected China with the world in terms of trading and population floating. International competition is largely influenced by its talent population stocking, in particular the high-end talent group. In the past few decades, talent group's mobility has become more frequent and international mobility has becomes more prevalent. Despite that this progress has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, competition for the super-talent group never stops. For instance, Singapore has taken the advantages of China's strict health measures on COVID-19 to attract high-end talents from China. Therefore, to maintain competitiveness for continuing attracting the high-end talent group, integration policy should lean toward more consistent with and suitable for international common principles in terms of duration of stay, settlement, and benefits to their direct family members. The mind-set of attracting descendants of the Chinese vs. other ethnicity should be changed to increase its diversity in terms of cultural background. Another area of increasing international completeness

in attracting foreign talent is through a more open policy for foreign students' working visas in China. Those students who work in China after graduation can help China build up stronger ties with international communities and promote China's internationalization.

The second area that needs urgent development is the human rights issue of the low-skilled immigrants in China. Due to the shortage of women in the marriage market, the underground "bride market" has been smuggling women from Southeast Asia to China. Little work has been done to prevent such human trafficking and protect their rights. With the increasing concern of unbalanced sex ratio for this issue, how China treats this group of people may affect the bilateral relation with the countries involved. It is also related to its international reputation on how to protect women and minority population's human rights.

Related to the human rights issue, China also faces challenges in dealing with the over stayers of the African immigrants in the southern city of Guangzhou. Many of them are in illegal status under the current law framework. How to limit its size and at the same time without violating their human rights are under heated debate. At the same time, China does not have domestic asylum laws and receive very few refugees. To build up China's international image, there should be social awareness and law development on raising awareness and getting support from government and organizations for global efforts in protecting people who have been forced to move due to wars or other disasters.

Conclusion

Historically China has never been an immigration country, and it was a common understanding that China does not need a large scale of immigrants to meet its labor force demand among both the government and the public. China's immigration has largely been dominated by the

descendants of Chinese, in particular the overseas returnees, and there was a very small proportion of real “foreigners” in China. However, in the past few decades, the size of foreign people in China has been steadily growing, due to the more prevalent international labor mobility. Despite the fact that China’s immigration policy mainly targeting the high-end talent group, there are still streams of lower-skilled migrants in China legally or illegally. This has brought challenges to human rights protection.

By reviewing the immigration and law changes over time, we argue that it is a strategic arrangement that the Chinese government did not actively develop the integration policy to integrate the immigrants in China. On the one hand, it can discourage further immigration flow so that the government can control the size at a manageable level to avoid job and resource competition with its own citizens. On the other hand, China can maintain its historical long practice for its population homogeneity by avoiding the infusion of the other racial/ethnicity population. However, despite its direct benefits to protect its own citizens’ interest, this deliberate strategy has brought challenges for China’s further attractiveness for high-end talents in the global market, as well its international image on human rights. Future policy is about how to infuse international norms in its immigration policy as well as on how to deal with the sentiment from its own citizens on maintaining homogeneity and nationalism.

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