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## Migration Research and Policy Consultancy in the People's Republic of China

### Abstract

This article starts by giving an overview of China's migration situation during the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following, the authors take stock of Chinese scholarship on migration and specialized research institutions that have developed in China. They aim to clarify the involvement of academic and other institutions in migration-related policy consultancy. The article highlights clear gaps in knowledge and public awareness about the possibly existing links between academic research and policymaking, and the extent to which Chinese scholarship may be informing relevant policymaking. Future research is warranted as China's migration situation, like its society, is experiencing massive change again due to COVID-19. In the summer of 2020, the first groups of selected foreign nationals were allowed to return to China. It remains to be seen how many foreign nationals will opt to return and when. It is also uncertain how many foreign nationals will decide to immigrate and take up employment in China. While there is great uncertainty about the medium- and long-term future of immigration to China and the country's overall future development, the relevance for migration-related research and policy consultancy is likely to grow due to China's interest in relaunching its economy, in attracting foreign professionals, and in continuing its engagement with other countries.

### Keywords

Migration, research, policymaking, migration governance, China, COVID-19

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## Migrationsforschung und Politikberatung in der Volksrepublik China

### Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel gibt zunächst einen Überblick über die Migrationssituation Chinas in den Jahren vor der COVID-19-Pandemie. Im Folgenden ziehen die Autoren eine Bilanz der chinesischen Migrationsforschung und der spezialisierten Forschungseinrichtungen, die sich in China entwickelt haben. Sie zielen darauf ab, die Beteiligung akademischer und anderer Institutionen an migrationsbezogener Politikberatung zu klären. Der Artikel weist auf wesentliche Lücken öffentlichen Bewusstseins über die möglicherweise bestehenden Verbindungen zwischen akademischer Forschung und politischer Entscheidungsfindung hin. Er zeigt außerdem auf, inwieweit die chinesische Wissenschaft die relevante politische Entscheidungsfindung in Zukunft beeinflussen könnte. Eine Ausweitung der Forschungsarbeit und der Beratung der Politik durch die Wissenschaft ist angezeigt. Chinas Migrationssituation hat sich unter dem Einfluss der COVID-19-Pandemie stark verändert. Im Sommer 2020 wurde bereits ersten Gruppen ausgewählter ausländischer Staatsangehöriger die Rückkehr gestattet. Es bleibt abzuwarten, wie viele von ihnen sich für eine dauerhafte Rückkehr und erneute Beschäftigungsaufnahme in China entscheiden werden und wann eine umfangreichere Remigration einsetzen wird. Während es große Unsicherheit über die mittel- und langfristige Zukunft der Einwanderung nach China gibt, dürfte die Relevanz von migrationsbezogener Forschung und Politikberatung dennoch zunehmen, da China stark daran interessiert ist, seine Wirtschaft wieder anzukurbeln, ausländische Fachkräfte anzuziehen und sein eigenes Engagement in anderen Ländern fortzusetzen, unter anderem durch die fortgesetzte Anwerbung von internationalen Studierenden.

### Schlagwörter

Migration, Forschung, Politikgestaltung, Governance der Migration, China, COVID-19

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## 1 Introduction: China's Changing Migration Situation

In 2019, just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, out of the 272 million international migrants recorded worldwide, 11 million held a passport of the People's Republic of China (PRC). However, China's annual net emigration rate stood at only -0.3% – one of the lowest worldwide. In general, China's emigration rates since the 1970s have always been comparatively low (UN DESA 2019a; UN DESA 2019c); and due to the closure of most international borders and a sizeable return of Chinese nationals to the PRC due to the pandemic, China's emigration rate in 2020, 2021, and perhaps in years to come will most certainly be even lower.

Prior COVID-19, Chinese emigration consisted predominately of students and well-educated, highly skilled, and affluent people who, in their majority, kept close links with China. Out of the 6 million students that have left since the 1980s, a staggering 5.1 million (85%) are said to have returned and taken up employment in China. Despite an increase in the number of Chinese studying abroad (662,100 in 2018, up from only 50,000 in 2000), brain- or skill-drain presented no major challenge for China, while the emigration of lower skilled Chinese remained limited and was often confined to project-specific and time-limited contract work abroad (Xiang 2016, pp. 1–7; Pieke et al. 2019; MoE 2019).

China's real dynamic was its massive internal migration and mobility, mainly directed from rural regions to so-called first- (e.g., Beijing and Shanghai), second- (e.g., Chongqing and Wuhan), and third-tier (e.g., Hefei and Xiamen) cities. In 2019, China's National Bureau of Statistics estimated the number of internal migrant workers was around 291 million people (NBS 2020; see also UN DESA 2019a). Due to repeated lockdowns and strict mobility regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic, internal population movements in 2020 almost certainly reached a historic low.

In terms of international migration to China, the 2010 census – which is China's most recent, reliable, and openly-accessible governmental information on population trends – saw the number of foreign nationals residing in China at 594,000, with the majority coming from South Korea (120,750), the United States of America (USA) (71,493), and Japan (66,159). Citizens of Myanmar (39,776), Vietnam (36,205), Canada (19,990), France (15,087), India (15,051), Germany (14,446), and Australia (13,286) formed the other main foreigner groups (NBS 2011). While China offers annual data on cross-border movements – in 2018, for example, more than 95 million foreign nationals crossed China's borders (Pieke et al. 2019, p. 4) – the National Statistics Bureau does not yet offer any specific, detailed, and continuously updated account on immigration. Due to COVID-19, China's next census has been

postponed to 2021. Considering the significant returns of foreign nationals from China that have taken place due to the pandemic, it is likely that China's new census will give a much lower account of international migrants present in China than in 2010.

In 2019, the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) put the number of international migrants living in the PRC at slightly above 1 million (UN DESA 2019b). However, for unknown reasons, close to 300,000 residents of Hong Kong (China's Special Administrative Region, and not a ›foreign country‹ in the Chinese perspective) were stated as the most important ›immigrant‹ group in China, followed by nationals of South Korea, the Philippines, Brazil, and Indonesia. Deducting the Hong Kongers from the total number puts the number of international migrants (approximately 700,000) only slightly higher than the 2010 Census (594,000) nine years earlier.

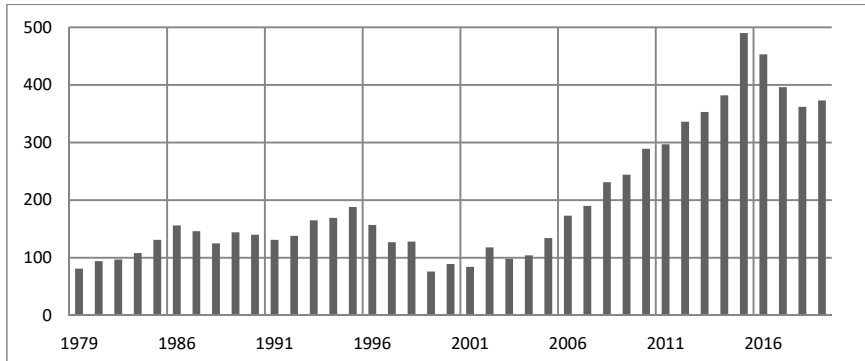
A regularly and more openly reported phenomenon has been the inflow of international students to China. Prior to COVID-19, half a million students from close to 200 countries studied in the PRC in 2018, ranking China as the fifth most important student destination worldwide, trailing only the USA, the UK, Australia, and Canada. Foreign students mostly came from South Korea (50,600), Thailand (28,608), Pakistan (28,023), India (23,198), the USA (20,996), and Russia (19,239) (MoE 2019b; ICEF 2019).

## 2 Research Directions in Chinese Migration Studies

The number of scholarly articles published in the PRC and in the Chinese language on international migration and mobility since the early 2000s has experienced noticeable growth (Figure 1). In contrast, during the 1980s and 1990s – the first decades of China's ›Opening Up‹ process started by President Deng Xiaoping in 1979 – few scholars published on these topics (Li 2009, pp. 1–10).

›Chinese Overseas‹ originally refers to emigration from imperial China and settlement processes that took place before the founding of the PRC in 1949 (Zhuang 2009). Early inquiries focused on Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia or the USA (e.g., Xi 1910), including ›A record of Chinese Laborers in the U.S.A. (United States of America)«, authored by a famous political scientist and revolutionist (Liang 1905). Liu and Xu (1935) aimed for the first theoretical discussions, while Qiu (1936) was among the first scholars to write about the political and social rights of Overseas Chinese.

Figure 1: Number of journal articles published on international migration and mobility, 1980–2020



Sources: Based on access to cnki.net and research using search terms ›international migration‹ and ›international mobility‹; number of journal articles in Chinese and published in the PRC between 1980 and 2020. The CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) promotes the collection and translation of high-quality (i.e., peer-reviewed) publications in China: <https://oversea.cnki.net/index/>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

### Chinese Overseas Studies

Following 1978, in the context of Deng Xiaoping's ›Opening-up‹ process (Ding 2010; Ding and Koslowski 2017, p. 105–110), academic interest expanded and ›Chinese Overseas Studies‹ became the predecessor of modern migration studies. There was a continuation of country studies, e.g., on Overseas Chinese in Indonesia (Li and Huang 1987), the Philippines (Huang and He 1987), or the USA (Yang et al. 1989); and some comparative work was also published (e.g., Chen 1989; Zhu 1990). Frequent topics included the self-identity of Chinese abroad (Cai 1991; Zheng 1991) or their education and religious beliefs (e.g., Zhou 1991; Kong 1991). Current research remains focused on these topics (e.g., Li and Wang 2019) and an increasing number of studies are political science-focused, e.g., on the image and implications of ›Overseas Chinese‹ for host countries and China's ›soft power‹ (Yu 2016; Zhang 2019), as well as the security of Overseas Chinese (Wang 2014; Zhang 2017b; Zhang and Zhang 2018).

### Returnee Studies

Returnee studies are considered another ›pioneer‹ in modern Chinese migration studies. Scholarship started with China's ›Opening-up‹ process and increasing return flows to China. The focus continues to be on students and highly skilled Chinese professionals returning to China (Su 1981; Cai 1992;

Wang 2004, 2005, 2008) and specific cities, e.g., Shanghai (Sun and Cai 2001). There is strong scholarship on (1) return motives (e.g., Li 2004; Zhang and Wang 2019) and (2) the actual process of return, employment, and reintegration (e.g., Wang and Chen 2020; Zhou 2013). Chinese scholars have also worked on (3) the theorization of return migration (e.g., Zhou and Luo 2018), (4) the concerted efforts of China (e.g., Thousand Talent Programs: Shen 1985; Luo and He 2005) in encouraging returns, or (5) the economic and social outcomes of return migration (e.g., Liang and Huang 2018; Sun and Cai 2001).

### The Study of Non-Chinese Immigration

Chinese Overseas Studies and returnee studies pioneered modern immigration studies in China and shaped the newest field of study: the immigration of non-Chinese nationals and foreigners without an ethnic Chinese background. Research on this topic, as well as the settlement and integration of non-Chinese residents in China only really began in the late 2000s. Academic studies are focused on the regulations and policies regarding the entrance, employment, and stay of foreigners, and often concern their illegal employment and stay (e.g., Liu 2011; Zhang 2004; Zeng 2018). Discussions on what China can learn from other countries and how it can service a growing number of foreign – including long-term and potentially permanent – residents later became topics (e.g., Yao 2016; Jiang and Fu 2019; Lu 2019).

There has also been growth in comparative work on traditional immigration countries (e.g. USA: Chen 2017), other important destinations (e.g., in the European Union) (Ma 2011; Cao and An 2016), and even other traditional non-immigration countries similar to China (e.g., Japan) (Zhang 2013). Recent publications have started to link how China is attracting and regulating migration to more general discussions of globalization and global migration governance (Zhang 2017a), ethical discussions concerning migration (Yang and You 2019), how to apply them to a Chinese context, and the growing engagement of China with international institutions in migration policymaking (Zhang and Geiger 2020).

While the aforementioned research direction on immigration is dominated by legal scholars, political scientists, and economists, a second main research direction was started by social scientists who focus on conducting qualitative, sociological, and ethnographical research – e.g., on African traders in Guangzhou (e.g., Liang 2013), Japanese nationals in Shanghai (Zhou and Liu, 2019), marriage migrants (e.g., Huang and Chen 2011), or Muslim entrepreneurs (e.g., Chen 2012). Topics include community formation among immigrants (Lv 2011) and the welfare of immigrant communities (Yue and Yao 2020). There has also been comparative work on immigrant communities

in China and other countries, and the role of social networks and transnational practices (e.g., Duan 2020; Lu 2016; Zhou 2014). Other scholars engage with newer theories and methodologies in international migration studies and how to apply these to the Chinese context (e.g., Li 2010; Liang, 2014; Zhang and Yu, 2020). Chinese academics also do not avoid politically sensitive topics such as irregular migration which, as in most other countries, also exist in China (e.g., Song 2015).

### 3 Institutionalization of Chinese Migration Studies

Increasing return migration and a growing number of international students and immigrants of non-Chinese background in China spurred the creation of dedicated research centers. As in many other countries, most research on migration and mobility in China takes place at public, government-funded universities. In addition, the Center for China and Globalization (CCG)<sup>1</sup>, a private think tank headquartered in Beijing, is now an important focal point for migration studies.

#### University Research Centers

Among the most relevant university research centers that exist today, several were directly founded by the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council of China (OCAO) or other central government entities. Hua Qiao (Overseas Chinese) University in Xiamen and Quanzhou and Jinan University in Guangzhou, both established by the OCAO during the early 1980s, lead in Chinese Overseas Studies. Since 2009, the Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies at Hua Qiao University has also covered international migration.<sup>2</sup> Jinan University's own Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies<sup>3</sup> also covers international migration. In 2015, the highly influential Chinese Academy of Social Science renamed its Center of Overseas Chinese Studies (created in 2002) to the Center for International Migration and Overseas Chinese Studies.<sup>4</sup> Another relevant institution is the Overseas China History Society of China (OCHSoC), founded by the All-Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (AFROC), another important central government-connected institu-

1 Center for China and Globalization (CCG). <http://en.ccg.org.cn>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

2 Institute of Overseas Chinese Studies at Hua Qiao University. <https://cir.hqu.edu.cn/xygk/xyjj.htm>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

3 Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies at Jinan University. <https://sis-aocs.jnu.edu.cn>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

4 Center for International Migration and Overseas Chinese Studies. Chinese Academy of Social Science. <http://103.247.176.245/iea/depts-34.htm>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

tion. The OCHSoC affiliates researchers across China, including scholars working on international migration.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to these centers, a number of Chinese universities established their own research centers dedicated to migration. These institutions include Peking University's Center for Studies of Overseas Chinese<sup>6</sup>, or the lesser-known University of Wuyi (located in Jiangmen), and its Center for Cultural Studies of Overseas Chinese.<sup>7</sup> In 2010, Shandong University founded an Institute of Migration Studies<sup>8</sup> which has already conducted large studies funded by China's National Social Science Fund on immigration governance, the integration of immigrants in China, and irregular migration. In 2019, Guangdong's University of Foreign Studies and Institute of Ethnic and Religious Studies opened a joint research center on migration<sup>9</sup>, while in the same year Zhejiang Normal University in Southeast China created its own migration research center.<sup>10</sup>

While international migration and the presence of larger numbers of international students are recent phenomena, thanks to its early establishment of centers dedicated to Chinese Overseas Studies, China has already achieved a comparatively high level of institutionalization in migration studies. At the end of 2016 an estimated 400–500 researchers were conducting studies related to migration and mobility. In the same year, China had around 30 research centers dedicated to migration studies (Zhang 2016).

### Private Think Tanks

The Center for China and Globalization (CCG), based in Beijing with subsidiary offices across China, is a leading think tank dedicated to the study of Chinese public policy and different aspects of globalization. While there is a growing number of think tanks in China, CCG is the only one that has developed a strong focus on migration. CCG was founded in 2008 by Huiyao (Henry) Wang and Lu Miao, two Chinese experts who have published extensively on Chinese overseas entrepreneurs, Chinese and international student

<sup>5</sup> Overseas China History Society of China (OCHSoC). <http://www.chinaql.org>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>6</sup> Studies of Overseas Chinese at Peking University. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/北京大学华侨华人研究中心/7045885?fr=aladdin>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Cultural Studies of Overseas Chinese Wuyi University. <https://www.wyu.edu.cn/gdqx/> Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>8</sup> Institute of Migration Studies. Shandong University. <http://www.ims.sdu.edu.cn/yjly.htm> Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>9</sup> Research Center on Migration. Guangdong's University of Foreign Studies and Institute of Ethnic and Religious Studies. <https://gjymyj.gdufs.edu.cn/index.htm>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>10</sup> Migration studies at Zhejiang Normal University. <http://zzb.zjnu.edu.cn/2019/0604/c9231a292490/page.htm>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.



mobility, and various aspects of return and international migration to China. While university-based research institutions on migration have proliferated, for more than a decade CCG has arguably held a much stronger influence in what concerns the translation of migration-related research in concrete policy proposals. CCG has also become a main focal point for Chinese researchers interested in migration and mobility, and in disseminating their research.

CCG has regularly published reports on Chinese and international migration since 2014.<sup>11</sup> With the support of LinkedIn China, Ctrip (China's leading travel portal), the international Wailian Group (a major Chinese immigration consultancy), and other private businesses, CCG also regularly hosts events for both Chinese and English language audiences, focusing on migration and other aspects of globalization. For many scholars, particularly junior/emerging scholars and researchers, CCG's annual conference on global talent mobility and international migration provides an important, and for China a unique platform to meet other researchers, including those from abroad, the Chinese, and the global policy and business community.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4 Existing Links between Research and Policymaking

International migration to China still constitutes a fairly new and often still politically sensitive topic for policymakers and academics alike (Pieke et al. 2019; Ding and Koslowski 2017; Xiang 2003, p. 21). It was only in March 2018 that China established its first unified, and central-level institution responsible for all aspects related to the immigration and integration of foreign nationals – the National Immigration Administration (NIA). In the coming years, the NIA will also be the relevant coordinating body for policy advice and migration-related research. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted NIA from the beginning of its existence. The NIA is a lead agency in coordinating major population flows, including the coordinated repatriation of foreign citizens, the issuance and extension of travel documents, etc. Aside from the NIA, other main points of reference and contact for Chinese scholars aiming to inform policymaking are China's State Council, the Ministry of Public Security (of which the NIA is part), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the Ministry of Education (MoE) (Zhang and Geiger 2020).

There is no public information available that would help clarify the extent to which migration scholars in recent years have been actively involved

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<sup>11</sup> Publications overview. Center for China and Globalization (CCG). <http://www.ccg.org.cn/book>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>12</sup> Events overview. Center for China and Globalization (CCG). <http://en.ccg.org.cn/html/events/3666.html>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

in the policy process and in informing the work of China's relevant central and sub-state authorities. However, it is plausible to conclude that certain scholars and research centers have been consulted and contributed, at least to some extent, to the formulation of policies. The majority of China's existing research centers were either directly founded by government institutions and/or regularly receive funding and other support from official institutions. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that research projects, publishing, and other activities in their majority also continue to require prior official approval.

Early policies related to immigration and the settlement, integration, and permanent residence of foreign nationals living in China date back to the 1980s. It was only in the 2000s when China started to overhaul these policies and develop new ones. Policy progress remained very cautious, slow, and gradual (Ding and Koslowski 2017, p. 106). The real push occurred between 2012–2019, culminating in the creation of the NIA. Some far-reaching policies, e.g., allowing foreign students to work during their studies and to receive post-graduate work and residence permits, or extending more long-term and permanent residence rights to foreign professionals, were adopted. Though it was increasingly acknowledged by policymakers, academics, and the public that China's knowledge-based high-tech and advanced financial industry also increasingly relies on foreign and non-Chinese professionals, the main policy goal remained motivating Chinese citizens to return to China. This goal will arguably continue to dominate China's policy agenda due to COVID-19, worldwide immigration and travel hurdles, and growing negative sentiments towards Chinese students, researchers, and technology experts. The current situation might provide a chance for China to encourage even more of its nationals to return and to use its immense overseas labor reservoir for expanding its high technology sector and knowledge-based economy.

Chinese scholarship interested in enhancing policies includes literature that, like Zhang (2017a) and Lv and Guo (2018), critically examines existing laws and policies, and their actual implementation. On the basis of their legal, political, and often empirical analysis this literature usually concludes by recommending specific policy enhancements (e.g., Qiu and Du 2014; Zhou 2016). Recent scholarship has pointed out the necessity of creating a centralized entity, the NIA, for regulating immigration-related matters (Wang 2018; Ye and Song 2019); it has also suggested that China needs to strongly embrace existing international institutions (e.g., International Organization for Migration, IOM) and contribute more actively to the global governance of migration (Lu 2019).

While it is difficult – and likely impossible – to clarify the extent to which specific academics or selected academic research centers have been able to inform China's policy progress, it is evident that the aforementioned think tank CCG has had a key role. CCG has closely partnered with the IOM since 2015 and has even taken responsibility for the Chinese translation of the IOM's flagship publication ›IOM World Migration Report‹ (e.g., CCG 2014). Furthermore, there is evidence that the advice provided by CCG and its president Dr. Huiyao Wang, to the State Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other relevant entities had significant impacts. Not only was the advice provided by CCG important to the proposal and creation of China's aforementioned new immigration administration (NIA)<sup>13</sup>, CCG's advice was also instrumental in the PRC's decision to join the IOM as a member state in June 2016<sup>14</sup> (Zhang and Geiger 2020).

The CCG also actively contributed to phase I (2015–2018) of the EU's bilateral ›Dialogue on Migration and Mobility‹, which is financed through the EU's Partnership Instrument and implemented by the IOM (Austrian Embassy in Beijing 2016, see also Deng and Koslowski 2017, p. 110). At the time of this writing, the CCG continues its collaboration with the IOM, the EU, and relevant Chinese authorities in the framework of the dialogue's three-year continuation phase II. Another example illustrating that the CCG is a key Chinese institution proposing policy initiatives even at the global level is the CCG's active engagement in the Paris Peace Forum, and its 2018 proposal to establish an alliance of global talent organizations in order to promote global governance in the field of highly skilled immigration (CCG 2018).

## 5 Relevance and Future of Migration Studies and Policy Consultancy

Academic inquiries into international migration to China and the presence of foreign non-Chinese nationals in the PRC are still in an early stage of development. The community of Chinese scholars working on international migration, international students, or doing comparative (global, regional, other groups, etc.) work is still fairly small and closed off to the global scholarly community. Discussions related to international migration, emigration, and refugees are still considered sensitive and often avoided. In fact, only during

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<sup>13</sup> Welcome speeches in presence of high-ranking officials from the National Immigration Administration. Third Annual Conference on Global Talent Mobility and International Migration, organized by CCG and held in Beijing, July 13, 2019. <http://en.ccg.org.cn/html/events/3666.html>. Accessed: 30.5.2020.

<sup>14</sup> Information obtained from CCG, July 2019.

the last decade has there been a growing yet still reluctant acknowledgement by policymakers and among the Chinese public that the PRC has indeed started to become an immigration country (Deng and Koslowski 2017, pp. 105–110). China has strongly benefitted from economic globalization and continued remittances, skill, and knowledge transfers through its own emigrant and student-abroad population. Increased immigration and student flows to China are a logical consequence of China's rising economic and political engagement with other countries.

Due to the relative recentness of scholarly studies and the sensitivities surrounding migration topics, the link between academic research and policymaking in China is presently unclear and seems to remain at an early stage of development. The big exception is the research, knowledge mobilization, and policy consultancy activities of China's only independent think tank on migration, the Center for China and Globalization (CCG). While there is little known about the Chinese academic sector and its relevance for policymaking, the fact that there has been continued investment and political support by the Chinese government is a strong indicator that migration studies are perceived as an important field. Therefore, it is also likely there are already important, yet not publicly disclosed links existing between academic research and policymaking.

China has become a major destination country for foreign students and professionals through decisive and concerted efforts by the PRC's government. This may also be an attempt by the PRC government to strengthen its soft power and international reputation, as argued by Deng and Koslowski (2017) and other scholars. Universities across China actively compete over and have managed to attract an ever-growing number of international students. At the same time, China has adopted policies to facilitate the post-graduate retention of these students for China and its booming economy. There are also strong indications that China has significantly benefitted from the presence of foreign entrepreneurs, start-ups, multinational companies, and their global talent force in the years prior to COVID-19 (Deng and Koslowski 2017; Geiger and Zhang 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is definitely a gamechanger for China. During the first six months of 2020 many foreign governments had their citizens evacuated and returned from the PRC. In order to prevent new COVID-19 outbreaks, on March 26, 2020 China followed other countries (e.g., the US, Canada, and EU member states) in blocking the entry of almost all foreign nationals, including those with existing long-term visas and permanent residence permits (MFA and NIA 2020). Many foreign nationals ended up stranded abroad, some separated from their family members for lengthy periods. The first groups of strictly selected and highly essential foreign

workers and their families were allowed back into China via charter flights starting in late May 2020, with some of the first planes departing from Germany (CGTN 2020). These flights and a return to regular flights were followed by a mandatory 14-day quarantine period for many travelers in selected ›transit cities‹ outside Beijing, Shanghai, and other main cities, and will continue through 2020. In August 2020 China started to allow the reissuance of residence permits to nationals from 36 European states, including European Union member states. This measure is expected to eventually be extended to other countries with low COVID-19 infection rates. China only accepted return applications from foreign nationals who previously held a residence permit in China (Shira and Associates 2020). Currently, there are no statistics available as to how many foreign nationals left China during 2020, nor is there reliable information related to the return of Chinese nationals and students to the PRC. Immigration and cross-border movements are yet again highly sensitive. Chinese policymakers have been very reluctant to make announcements and to release data due to widespread concerns among the Chinese public about a likely ›import‹ of COVID-19 following months of strict, yet highly successful lockdowns and other measures. China's upcoming 2020 census – which has been postponed into the year 2021 – and its data on immigration, how many Chinese nationals have returned to mainland China due to the pandemic, and how many foreigners have left China will provide a relevant orientation for the PRC's short- and medium-term policy-making.

While China's economy started to relaunch during the summer of 2020, its economic and social context has drastically changed due to the mentioned departure of many foreign nationals and the return of a likely considerable number of Chinese nationals. This new situation warrants and strongly highlights the need for more publicly available, detailed, and regularly updated statistics and information. In the context of, and caused by COVID-19, both internal and international migration and mobility will not lose their relevancy, but instead will gain more relevance.

China has demonstrated a strong interest and political will in being the first country to emerge out of the pandemic, not weaker but perhaps even stronger than before, in order to also withstand the political and economic pressure increasingly exerted by the USA and other countries on its economy and political system. China also currently seems to be moving forward with its ambitious ›One Belt and One Road‹ (OBOR) project – a project that warrants itself more detailed and regularly updated research due to its obvious links and likely impact on migration and mobility processes. The years prior to COVID-19 witnessed growing student flows, business travel, and labor migration from many countries participating in the OBOR project. While the

European Union is out of reach for many, and the USA has taken drastic measures to curb immigration, China has opened its doors and become a destination of choice for many foreign nationals from areas like Central Asia, Latin America, and other Asian countries participating in OBOR. In order to successfully manage its own post-COVID economic and social development and that of its OBOR partners, and to regulate significant population movements that are likely to soon re-emerge, China will strongly depend even more on its experts and their independent research and evidence-based advice.

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