PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD INTERNAL AND FOREIGN MIGRATION
EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

DAVID A. SINGER*
KAI QUEK

Abstract We explore attitudes toward internal and foreign migration in China using an original survey experiment. If labor-market competition drives attitudes, then residents will be opposed to migrants with comparable skill levels, regardless of migrant origin. If residents fear a dilution of national identity, then they will be more opposed to foreign than internal migration. We conduct a national survey in Mainland China, where we randomly assign respondents to answer questions about migrants with different skill levels and from either foreign countries or other provinces in China. We find that attitudes cleave over skill level, but the foreign-internal dimension is, on its own, not a salient cleavage in preferences. However, when considering high-skilled migrants, respondents are more supportive of foreign than internal migration; when considering low-skilled migrants, they are more opposed to foreign than internal migration. The results cast doubt on material explanations for attitudes toward migration and suggest a reevaluation of cultural threat arguments that privilege national borders.

Do prevailing arguments about attitudes toward international immigration also apply to the movement of people within a country? This question is especially salient for large emerging-market countries, many of which are experiencing a substantial dislocation of residents from rural areas to

DAVID A. SINGER is the department head and Raphael Dorman-Helen Starbuck Professor of Political Science at MIT, Cambridge, MA, USA. KAI QUEK is an associate professor of politics at the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong. The authors thank Adam Berinsky, Greg Distelhorst, Diana Fu, In Song Kim, Evan Lieberman, the anonymous reviewers at POQ, and audiences at Columbia University, Johns Hopkins SAIS, University of New Mexico, National Chung Hsing University, University of Toronto, and University of Zurich for valuable feedback, and Zenobia Chan, Nicholas Intscher, John Koo, and Eddy Yeung for excellent research assistance. This work was supported by funding from the University of Hong Kong to K.Q. *Address correspondence to David A. Singer, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Political Science, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA; email: dasinger@mit.edu.

https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab065
© The Author(s) 2022. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of American Association for Public Opinion Research. All rights reserved. For permissions, please email: journals.permissions@oup.com
manufacturing centers as well as an increase in foreign immigration. Past scholarship has posited that the movement of people across borders can generate concerns over job security and falling wages for local residents if migrants have similar skills (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006; Borjas 2011). An untested observable implication of this argument is that the public should have similar economic concerns about internal migrants who, like foreigners, compete in local labor markets. Another strand of scholarship is skeptical of material drivers of opposition to immigration and instead points to noneconomic considerations, including the cultural threat of outsiders from foreign nations (see, e.g., Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007, 2010; Sides and Citrin 2007; Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). If the dilution of national identity and culture is the *sine qua non* of cultural threat, then residents should show greater opposition to foreigners than internal migrants, who are by definition conationalists. On the other hand, if residents from the countryside instill their own brand of cultural threat to urban dwellers, then the foreign-internal divide in attitudes will be less prominent.

To test hypotheses about the determinants of attitudes toward immigration, we conducted an original survey experiment in China that examined public preferences toward foreign and internal migration. In a nationwide survey, we randomly assigned respondents to answer questions about migrants who come to China from other countries, or conationalists who move from other provinces to the respondent’s province. We also randomized the skill level—either high skilled or low skilled—of the migrants. This design enables us to obtain an unbiased comparison between the distribution of attitudes toward high-skilled and low-skilled foreign and internal migration.

China is an appropriate environment for such a study, given its recent history of mass internal migrations from the countryside to urban centers as well as foreign immigration from Africa and Southeast Asia. Moreover, China’s government provides barriers to foreigners who seek visas, and a national registration system restricts internal migrants’ ability to access public services. Therefore, focusing on the foreign-internal and skilled-unskilled dimensions of public attitudes tracks the salient dimensions of government policy over migration.

Our results challenge predictions from economic and nationality-based arguments about migration. Whether migrants are foreigners or conationalists does not, by itself, shape respondents’ preferences. When considering high-skilled migrants, however, respondents are more supportive of foreign than internal migration; when considering low-skilled migrants, they are more opposed to foreign than internal migration. Skilled foreigners are valued, whereas unskilled foreigners are shunned. Finally, in line with past research, we found no evidence of material drivers of preferences: respondent skill levels, measured by educational attainment and—in a novel twist—by self-
assessments, are not associated with attitudes toward foreign or internal migrants with similar skill levels.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to compare attitudes toward internal and foreign migration using a survey experiment. This is also the first national-level study that grapples experimentally with immigration attitudes in China. We join a small but growing literature on the determinants of attitudes toward internal migration in large emerging-market countries, and an emerging literature on attitudes in China.¹

**Economics, National Identity, and Public Opinion toward Immigration**

Economic models suggest that the movement of people across borders generates distributional consequences. Low-skilled immigrants place downward pressure on the wages of low-skilled native workers; when wages are sticky, they cause higher unemployment (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006; Borjas 2011). The same dynamic applies to high-skilled immigrants and high-skilled native residents. Whether or not these changes in wages or unemployment hold in practice, if native residents expect greater labor-market competition, they are likely to oppose immigrants with similar skills.²

In societies with government-provided healthcare, education, and income support, residents may also fear that migrants will impose a burden on public finance. Native residents might therefore expect immigration to trigger a rise in taxes or an erosion of public services (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007; Facchini and Mayda 2009). As with the labor-market competition channel, native residents’ expectations might not correspond with reality if immigrants are net contributors to the public purse, but nevertheless they might oppose immigration with fiscal concerns in mind (for a skeptical view, see Tingley 2013).

Individuals might also believe that immigration is a threat to national culture and identity (Fetzer 2000; Chandler and Tsai 2001; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Sides and Citrin 2007; Card, Dustmann, and Preston 2012). At issue is the tension between in-groups and out-groups. As Kinder and Kam note, “The policy issues that arise around immigration—whether outsiders should be allowed in; whether borders should be

². See Murard (2017). For similar factor-endowment-related arguments in the context of attitudes toward international trade, see Baker (2005) and Ardanaz, Murillo, and Pinto (2013). On individuals’ countervailing beliefs about the effect of global market integration on themselves and others, see Guisinger (2017).
strengthened or relaxed; whether outsiders, if allowed in, should be granted the same rights and privileges as insiders—lend themselves readily to ethnocentric appeals among elites and to ethnocentric thinking among the general public” (Kinder and Kam 2010, p. 127). An individual’s stance toward national identity is more difficult to measure than economic factors, but nevertheless most recent studies acknowledge that cultural concerns are partly responsible for driving opposition to immigration (Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013, p. 394).³

National-level surveys that pose questions about immigration are ill suited to testing competing hypotheses, because such data do not allow us to isolate the causal effects of the variables of interest (see Ford 2011; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013). Thus, recent research has used experimental methods and targeted samples to overcome the limitations of past efforts. Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010), for example, conducted a US survey in which they randomly assigned respondents to answer questions about immigrants with different skill levels (see also Goldstein and Peters 2014). A subsequent study examined potential relationships between skill levels, industry locations, and other respondent characteristics in a targeted survey of 12 industries (Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Margalit 2015). These studies find that fears about labor-market competition do not drive attitudes toward immigration. However, Dancygier and Donnelly (2013) find that economic context matters: respondents in growing sectors are more favorable toward immigration than those in declining sectors. Other scholars find support for labor-market competition in narrower areas. For example, Malhotra and his colleagues find evidence of job and wage insecurity in a “most likely case” of high-tech workers evaluating the desirability of granting H-1B visas to Indian immigrants (Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013). Ongoing research by Zhu (2017) finds that labor-market concerns shape attitudes toward internal migration in China, but only after respondents are prompted to think about the economic impacts of migrant inflows.⁴

Other researchers find evidence of cultural threat through experimental methods. Adida and her colleagues find that a Muslim immigrant job candidate in France is less likely to receive a job interview callback than an otherwise identical Christian immigrant counterpart (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2010). Another study finds that respondents in the United States are more likely to oppose immigration when they read news stories about the costs of

---

³ See also Facchini, Mayda, and Mendola (2013). Recent work by d’Hombres and Nunziata (2016) suggests that respondent education might mitigate these cultural concerns. On sociotropic sources of immigration bias, see Rosenbluth, Kage, and Tanaka (2016).

⁴ For a related argument about information as a cue for egocentrism in the context of preferences over monetary policy, see Bearce and Tuxhorn (2017). On self-interest and trade policy, see Rho and Tomz (2017).
Latino immigrants rather than European immigrants (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008). And finally, Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) confront US respondents with a choice of two immigrants whose attributes vary on nine dimensions, including country of origin and skills. The effect of immigrants’ countries of origin—their admittedly imprecise indicator of cultural differences—is typically small and statistically insignificant, but English language ability is an important predictor. The study also finds that Americans’ preferences do not vary with their own education or skills.

In all of these studies, respondents are asked to evaluate immigrants from foreign countries. However, some of the threats that underpin attitudes toward immigrants should also be present when considering internal migration. In particular, the labor-market competition channel need not depend on foreigners; residents from elsewhere in the country who seek employment in a different region could generate fears of job market security by local residents. Given that taxation and public spending are often handled by regional authorities, internal migration could also trigger concerns about the fiscal burden of public services provision. In short, it is the movement of people into one’s community that leads to these material concerns, not necessarily the movement of people across national borders. On the other hand, if inflows of people perceived to threaten a nation’s “distinctive identity” (Sides and Citrin 2007, p. 480) elicit particular hostility among local residents, then internal migrants—who by definition have the same nationality as locals—will instill less fear than foreigners, who are more likely to speak different languages and engage in different cultural and religious practices (for a study of the impact of language, accents, and cultural norms on support for immigration, see Hopkins 2015).

The theoretical irrelevance of crossing a national border for the labor-market channel, and its centrality for arguments based on national identity, suggests an unexploited strategy for identifying public motivations for opposing immigration. If labor pressures are paramount, then residents’ opposition to migrants should not hinge upon whether they are foreign or internal. For example, a low-skilled resident should fear a loss in job security when faced with increases in either foreign or internal low-skilled migration. If the public fears a dilution of its national identity, then residents should favor internal migrants over foreign ones, conditional upon their skills. And if respondents are more sensitive to the skill level of foreign migrants than internal migrants, then we would expect the interaction of migrants’ skill level and origin to reveal the extent of that sensitivity.

**Foreign and Internal Migration in China**

Since the 1980s, China has experienced a “tidal wave” of rural migrant labor to its urban areas (Roberts 1997). More than 260 million residents have left
their agricultural jobs behind and moved to cities to take up higher-paying positions in manufacturing and services (World Bank 2014, p. 5). Rapid urbanization is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to China—indeed, the movement of residents from the countryside to cities is a rite of passage for all developing economies—but the absolute numbers are unprecedented.

A system of urban-rural certification also differentiates China’s internal migration from those of other countries at a similar stage of development. A household registration system (hukou) provides every citizen with a permanent rural or urban designation (Chan and Buckingham 2008). Those with a rural designation have historically been precluded from receiving government services, even if they relocate to urban areas; however, the State Council has experimented with loosening these restrictions, with implementation largely left to individual city governments (Fan 2008, p. 67). Nevertheless, approximately 85 percent of urban migrants are ineligible for the basic government-provided entitlements offered to local hukou residents (Zhang and Li 2016, pp. 1–2). In general, regional authorities play a dominant role in the provision of welfare and public services. Eighty-five percent of public expenditure in 2016 was attributable to the subnational governments (National Census Bureau of China 2017, table 7–1).

In recent years, foreign immigration has also increased dramatically, further complicating the influx of workers to urban centers. Data on Chinese migration are scarce, but a report from the Bureau of Exit and Entry Administration of the Ministry of Public Security found that more than 25 million foreigners entered the country in 2007, more than 10 percent of whom for employment reasons.5 China’s migrant statistics may be drastically understated, given the documented waves of immigration from countries like North Korea, especially during that country’s famine in the late 1990s. Hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees entered China in the 1970s, mostly through the border town of Dongxing in the southern province of Guangxi, and were then resettled in several neighboring provinces.6 Moreover, illegal immigration is common, especially to China’s large metropolitan areas (Pieke 2012). For documented migrants, the top five countries of origin are South Korea, the United States, Japan, Burma, and Vietnam (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011).

Foreign immigration is controversial in China, even though foreigners constitute a small percentage of the country’s population. In light of China’s “brain drain,” in which millions of residents have immigrated to other countries for education and employment, inflows of foreign labor have an obvious

economic appeal (see Tai and Truex 2015). China’s aging population and steep decline in the growth rate of its labor force intensify the appeal of foreign workers. However, native residents sometimes view immigrants as opportunist fortune-seekers who are prone to crime (Pieke 2012). Tensions occasionally flare between immigrant communities and local law enforcement, thereby intensifying native residents’ unfavorable attitudes (Bodomo 2010). Driven in part by public concerns over foreigners, the National People’s Congress passed a new Exit and Entry Administration Law in 2013, which raised penalties for immigration offenses and set a legal framework for regulating residency privileges.

Internal migration is also controversial in China. Although workers from other provinces generally speak the same language and share the same nationality and ethnicity (Han Chinese) as urban residents, some urban dwellers may harbor prejudices toward them and believe they are uneducated and prone to crime (Solinger 1999; Zhu 2017). Survey evidence of attitudes toward migration is scarce in China, but two recent studies are noteworthy. Zhu (2017) finds that urban native residents think about the economic and material implications of internal migration when primed in a survey, but otherwise they do not make a connection between their financial circumstances and migration. Tse (2016) finds that educated and high-income urban residents harbor more prejudice toward internal migrants than less educated and poorer residents.

China is a promising laboratory for a study of public opinion toward migration, given the prevalence and political salience of both foreign and internal migration. As Zhu (2017) notes, the political economy of China’s internal migration is similar to that of foreign immigration, except that religious and ethnic differences are less salient for the case of internal migration. We therefore have an opportunity to adjudicate among labor-market competition, national identity, and cultural threat as drivers of attitudes toward migration in a country that is experiencing notable movements of people within and across borders. We can also ascertain the validity of arguments developed in a US and European setting to other contexts.

**Experiment**

We conducted our survey in China from April 27 to May 9, 2016. We included an experiment in the survey, which was fielded online in order to

---


cover all provinces and capital municipalities in Mainland China. Anonymized online surveys can reduce political and social desirability biases, which is a crucial consideration in the authoritarian context of China (e.g., Chang and Krosnick 2010; Huang 2015; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016). We partnered with a survey company that recruited a nonprobability sample of 1,479 adults (18 years and older) in Mainland China using quota sampling to match the national census population on gender, age, race, income, and geography. These subjects were directed to the online survey hosted at the researcher end, allowing us to retain full control over the experiment and data collection. Appendix A highlights the sample characteristics. Due to randomization, the groups will be statistically the same in expectation, and this was borne out in this particular random draw (a balance check is reported in Supplementary Material section A). All analyses are unweighted.

In our experiment, we randomly divided our respondents into four groups in a $2 \times 2$ factorial design. Each group received one of four versions of a survey question that asks, “Do you think the number of [high-/low-skilled] immigrants from [foreign countries who come to China to live/from other provinces who come to the province or municipality where you are to live] should be increased, left the same as it is now, or decreased?”

The dependent variable is measured on a seven-point scale: 3 (increase by a very large amount), 2 (increase a lot), 1 (increase a little), 0 (keep the same as it is now), −1 (decrease a little), −2 (decrease a lot), −3 (decrease to zero). Appendix B displays the question wordings as translated into English; Supplementary Material section D shows the original Chinese alongside the English translation.

Results

We begin by displaying the pooled distribution of preferences over high-skilled and low-skilled migration from any origin. The barplots in figure 1 show the fraction of respondents answering each of the seven answer categories, with the whiskers showing the upper 95th percent confidence interval derived from the underlying distribution of the data approximated by non-parametric bootstrapping (see Efron and Tibshirani 1993, pp. 170–74). In line with past research, respondents clearly preferred high-skilled to low-skilled migration. Approximately 47 percent of respondents prefer a decrease in low-skilled migration (whether a little, a lot, or to zero), whereas about 22 percent of respondents prefer a decrease for high-skilled migration, with a difference in means of 0.765 on the ordinal dependent variable ($p < 0.001$; $n = 1,479$; two-tailed).

More surprising are the results displayed in figure 2, which shows the distribution of preferences over foreign and internal migration, pooling across the different skill types. Respondents make little distinction between foreign
and internal migration. Approximately 37 percent of respondents prefer a decrease in foreign migration; the corresponding number for internal migration is just slightly lower at 31 percent, and the difference in means is not statistically significant (difference: 0.103; \( p = 0.122; \) \( n = 1,479; \) two-tailed). Prevailing arguments about the role of national identity and cultural threat suggest that respondents would be less supportive of foreign migrants than internal conationalists, but our experimental results do not support this prediction. Moreover, residents of China appear to be less opposed to foreign immigration (of any skill level) than residents of the United States. Both Citrin et al. (1997, p. 862) and Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010, p. 67), for example, find that approximately 50 percent of US respondents prefer a decrease in immigration.

Nevertheless, cultural threat is likely still at work in driving respondents to oppose internal migration. Some residents might fear that internal migrants

Figure 1. Preference for high- and low-skilled migration. The vertical axis shows the fraction of respondents who answer each of the seven categories.
will behave boorishly or make their communities less safe. But if these threats exist, they are not based on national identity. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

Figure 3 breaks down the average preferences on each of the four experimental groups. The results show that respondents prefer high-skilled over low-skilled migration for both foreign migrants (difference in means: 1.096; \(p < 0.001; n = 747\); two-tailed) and internal migrants (difference in means: 0.423; \(p < 0.001; n = 732\); two-tailed). In both cases, preferences are positive (favoring an increase) toward high-skilled migration but negative (favoring a decrease) toward low-skilled migration. The difference in the intensity of preferences between foreign and internal migration—clearly evident in figure 3—is statistically significant for both skill levels. Respondents are more opposed to low-skilled foreign migration compared to low-skilled internal migration (difference in means: 0.416; \(p < 0.001; n = 736\); two-
tailed), but more supportive of high-skilled foreign migration compared to high-skilled internal migration (difference in means: 0.257; \( p = 0.004; n = 743; \) two-tailed). These results are consistent with sociotropic concerns about the economy as a whole, assuming respondents believe that high-skilled migrants generate larger gains for the economy than low-skilled migrants (Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010). The difference in preference intensity between foreign and internal migration, at either skill level, could reflect the notion that skilled foreigners may bring talent to the local economy that is not otherwise accessible from the national population, whereas low-skilled foreigners have little to add that could not otherwise be provided by conationals from other provinces (see, e.g., Center for China and Globalization 2017; Liang and Wang 2020). The results also suggest that respondents are more polarized when evaluating foreign migrants: they are supportive of skilled foreigners, but resistant to unskilled

Figure 3. Average responses by treatment group. Preferences range from \(-3\) (decrease to zero) to \(3\) (increase by a very large amount).
foreigners. For internal migrants, respondent attitudes also vary conditional upon skill level, but with less intensity.

Our survey asks respondents to assess migration from foreign countries to their country, and from other provinces to their province (see Appendix B and Supplementary Material, section D). One might fear that respondents considering internal migration might have more intense preferences than those considering foreign immigration, given that the migrants are posited to come to their own province, not just their country. The results in figure 3 suggest that this is not the case; in fact, respondents have more intense preferences when considering foreign migration. We suspect that proximity concerns are not prominent in respondents’ thinking, especially given that most of China’s provinces have well over 20 million inhabitants.

To explore the data econometrically, table 1 presents ordered probit estimates with the inclusion of demographic covariates (results from OLS are nearly identical for all models). The dependent variable is the seven-category survey response described above, coded from −3 (“decrease to zero”) to 3 (“increase by a very large amount”). The binary variable Foreign is coded 1 if the respondent received a question about foreign migrants and 0 if otherwise, whereas the variable Skill is coded 1 if the question is about high-skilled migrants and 0 if the question is about low-skilled migrants. The model specification is

$$
\mu_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{FOREIGN}_i + \beta_2 \text{SKILL}_i + Z_i \psi
$$

where the parameter $\beta_1$ identifies the premium that respondents attach to foreign migrants relative to internal migrants, and $\beta_2$ identifies the premium for high-skilled relative to low-skilled migrants. Model 2 also includes covariates $Z$, which include the respondents’ age and gender.9 Across both of these specifications, the variable Skill is positive and significant, and Foreign is not statistically significant. The results from columns 1 and 2 reinforce our conclusion that a migrant’s skill level largely determines whether a respondent supports or opposes migration.

Model 3 adds an interaction term to more formally explore the patterns in figure 3, where the parameter $\beta_3$ captures how the attitudes toward foreign migration vary conditional upon migrants’ skill level:

$$
\mu_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{FOREIGN}_i + \beta_2 \text{SKILL}_i + \beta_3 (\text{FOREIGN}_i \times \text{SKILL}_i) + Z_i \psi.
$$

The results are in line with expectations based on figure 3: the coefficient for Foreign is negative, the coefficient for Skill is positive, and the interaction term

---

9. On the importance of gender in the context of attitudes toward international trade, see Guisinger (2016).
Table 1. Determinants of support for migration (ordered probit estimates)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign</td>
<td>-0.0655</td>
<td>-0.0655</td>
<td>-0.3633</td>
<td>-0.0665</td>
<td>-0.0671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0537)</td>
<td>(0.0538)</td>
<td>(0.0767)</td>
<td>(0.0538)</td>
<td>(0.0538)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.217</td>
<td>0.213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>0.6428</td>
<td>0.6424</td>
<td>0.3510</td>
<td>0.2016</td>
<td>0.6639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0551)</td>
<td>(0.0552)</td>
<td>(0.0768)</td>
<td>(0.1812)</td>
<td>(0.0991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign × skill</td>
<td>0.5901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1082)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.0409</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0389)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.294</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill × education</td>
<td>0.1424</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0561)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school dropout</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1459)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill × high school dropout</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.6195</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.2219)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school grad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0590</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1131)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.602</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill × high school grad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0225</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1566)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.886</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA or above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.0112</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.0904)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill × BA or above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0700</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.1279)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.584</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
is also positive. To interpret this result, consider that the coefficient on Foreign reflects the association between the foreign survey frame (Foreign = 1) and attitudes when the interaction term is zero (i.e., when Skill = 0). In other words, the negative coefficient on Foreign suggests that respondents have more negative attitudes toward low-skilled foreign migration than low-skilled internal migration. To test the labor-market competition argument—namely, that respondents will oppose migrants with skills similar to their own—we also include the following specification for model 4, which adds Education—scored 1 if the respondent is a high school dropout, 2 for high school graduate, 3 for junior college graduate, and 4 for university graduate (BA) or higher—as well as an interaction between the Skill survey frame and respondent education:

\[ \mu_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{FOREIGN}_i + \beta_2 \text{SKILL}_i + \beta_3 \text{EDUCATION}_i + \beta_4 (\text{SKILL}_i \times \text{EDUCATION}_i) + Z_i \psi. \]

As in previous research, we use education as a proxy for respondent skill level.\(^\text{10}\) As shown in column 4, the interaction term is positive and significant, suggesting that the premium attached to high-skilled migration varies positively with respondent education. A negative and significant interaction term would have provided support for the labor-market competition channel.

\[\begin{array}{l}
\text{Table 1. Continued} \\
\hline
\text{Dependent variable: support for migration [–3, 3]} \\
\hline
\text{(1)} & \text{(2)} & \text{(3)} & \text{(4)} & \text{(5)} \\
\hline
\text{Age} & -0.0025 & -0.0031 & -0.0025 & -0.0024 \\
& (0.0021) & (0.0021) & (0.0021) & (0.0021) \\
p = 0.235 & p = 0.145 & p = 0.231 & p = 0.261 \\
\text{Male} & 0.0942 & 0.1062 & 0.0914 & 0.0928 \\
& (0.0544) & (0.0545) & (0.0544) & (0.0545) \\
p = 0.083 & p = 0.051 & p = 0.093 & p = 0.088 \\
 Observations & 1,479 & 1,478 & 1,478 & 1,476 & 1,476 \\
Pseudo-R^2 & 0.0284 & 0.0292 & 0.0353 & 0.0305 & 0.0314 \\
log likelihood & -2381 & -2378 & -2363 & -2371 & -2369 \\
chi-square & 139.3 & 143.1 & 172.9 & 149.2 & 153.8 \\
\hline
\end{array}\]

\text{NOTE}.—Ordered probit estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Constant cuts omitted.

\(^{10}\) We follow Scheve and Slaughter (2001), Facchini and Mayda (2009), Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010), and other studies in using education as a proxy for skill level, despite its weaknesses. See the robustness section for a further exploration.
Model 5 emulates the modeling strategy in Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010) by relaxing the assumption of linearity in the conditional relationship between respondent education and preferences toward migration. This model allows for a different premium placed on high-skilled immigration for each of the respondent educational attainment categories. The omitted reference category is “junior college graduate.” Coefficients on these terms are statistically insignificant, although the interaction term of Skill and “high school dropout” is negative and significant. The combined results from Models 4 and 5 suggest that support for migration—whether foreign or internal—is positively correlated with education and does not reflect a calculus of labor-market competition.

This finding is also reflected in figure 4, which depicts average support for migration across the four educational categories. As education and presumably skills increase, respondents remain supportive of high-skilled migration. The results also suggest an intensification of the high-skilled versus low-skilled distinction for foreign immigration as education increases. Highly educated respondents are especially supportive of high-skilled foreigners and opposed to low-skilled foreigners.

Figure 4. Average responses by educational attainment. Preferences (vertical axis) range from −3 (decrease to zero) to 3 (increase by a very large amount). The smallest subset is “High School Dropout” (20 to 33 respondents per treatment), followed by “High School Grad” (64 to 84) and “College Grad” (109 to 112). The largest subset is “BA or Above” (146 to 170).
Robustness

We conducted a number of additional tests and robustness checks.\textsuperscript{11} Notably, we found that the only noticeable regional pattern was that respondents in Guangdong province had a small but statistically significant preference for foreign versus internal migration. This finding might reflect a mild backlash against substantial internal migration in the province in recent years. Guangdong is China’s most populous province and a hub of large-scale manufacturing industries. Of its approximately 110 million residents, nearly 25 million are internal migrants from other regions.\textsuperscript{12} However, we should not make too much of this finding; indeed, respondents in China’s other densely populated manufacturing-focused coastal provinces, including Fujian, Zhejiang, Shandong, and others, supported foreign and internal migration roughly equally.

Nevertheless, to ensure that the presence of respondents who are themselves internal migrants does not bias our results, we limited our sample to include only respondents who live in provinces that have at least 90 percent locally born populations based on China’s most recent census in 2010. The resulting sample, which excludes the coastal provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, and several others, is nearly halved at 807 observations, but our results were virtually unchanged (see Supplementary Material, section C).

Do respondents consistently envision migrants from a particular country or of a particular race? Previous literature suggests that the different ethnic identities of outsiders may influence the perception of economic threat differently.\textsuperscript{13} However, as with the ANES survey about immigration in the United States, our survey did not prompt respondents to specify their own assumptions about migrant characteristics; we specified only the territorial origin (foreign or internal) and skill level of the migrants because these characteristics correspond to the relevant dimensions of migration policy in China. Nonetheless, the robustness of our findings to dropping the coastal provinces—in which European, American, and African migrants are more common than in the interior provinces—suggests that respondent attitudes are consistent across provinces with different migrant pools (Supplementary Material, section C). The results are also consistent across provinces where migrants are more likely to be ethnically diverse and those where

\textsuperscript{11} In addition to the tests reported below, we found no associations between attitudes toward migration and indicators of respondent nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Our main results are unchanging with the inclusion of additional covariates such as political knowledge and Communist Party affiliation.


\textsuperscript{13} In the US context, Bobo and Hutchings (1996) argued that such perceptions may be driven by feelings of racial alienation arising from competition in the economic and political spheres. In Europe, Hainmueller and Hiscox (2007) suggested that anti-immigration sentiments are strongly associated with perceived differences in cultural values, whereby presumptions about immigrants appear to cleave along their different national or ethnic origins.
migrants are more homogeneous (Supplementary Material, section C). It appears that perceptions of threat arising from racial alienation or ethnic distinctions might be less salient in China than in some other parts of the world.

To address the concern that respondent education is a problematic measure of labor-market skills, we asked respondents to self-assess their occupations as “high skilled” or “low skilled” and used the resulting binary variable in Model 4 in place of Education. This is an ideal test in that respondents determine what constitutes high- and low-skilled labor for both themselves and migrants. The labor-market competition hypothesis suggests that self-reported high- (low-) skilled respondents would oppose migration described as high (low) skilled, but neither self-reported skill level nor its interaction with the skilled survey frame are statistically significant.

As a final note, as with most past surveys we have no way of knowing what associations come to mind when respondents are asked to assess foreign or internal migration. As discussed earlier, China’s inflows of low-skilled foreign migrants include people from Sub-Saharan Africa as well as neighboring East- and Southeast Asian countries. Japan and South Korea are also important sources of high-skilled migrants, as are the United States and the countries of Western Europe. Internal migrants in China are, in expectation, no different than other residents in terms of nationality, religion, ethnicity, and language (although regional dialects and accents exist). Skill is most likely the key relevant attribute, and our survey manipulates this variable experimentally. When respondents consider low-skilled internal migration, the existence of the hukou system and regional prejudices suggest that non-nationality-based cultural fears may arise.

Feasibility constraints precluded an attempt to implement a conjoint experiment in which multiple attributes of migrants—including nationality, occupation, ethnicity, and so on—could be experimentally manipulated. However, as evidenced by the rural and urban designations of the hukou system and the occupational discrimination in the Exit and Entry Administration Law, China’s policies over migration cleave mostly over skill level, not over more fine-grained characteristics. Our experimental design is theoretically

14. We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this robustness check.
15. Han (2017), for instance, found that increased contact with foreigners leads to positive attitudes toward foreign immigrants in China, rather than exacerbating perceptions of threat or beliefs on racial stigmas. Zhou, Shenasi, and Xu (2016) reported that in Guangzhou (with a large African migrant population), most locals feel the government should grant Africans permanent residency (78.8 percent) and many claim they have no problem accepting Africans into the community to live and work.
16. Approximately 44 percent of respondents self-reported their occupations as “low skilled.”
17. For example, Chinese citizens may shun low-skilled foreign migrants if these migrants are associated with illegal immigration. However, we find little difference in opinion toward foreign migrants between border provinces (where illegal immigrants are much more prevalent) and non-border provinces.
justified on the grounds that we focus on the policy dimensions that the Chinese government itself has found most salient. Moreover, recent literature shows that authoritarian governments are susceptible to public pressure, and the stability of the Chinese regime in particular may depend on how the government addresses public sentiments (e.g., Tsai 2007; Chen, Pan, and Xu 2016; Truex 2016; Distelhorst and Hou 2017; Meng, Pan, and Yang 2017; Pan and Xu 2018).

Discussion

How do residents view outsiders who relocate to seek employment and a better life? A large body of scholarship has attempted to answer this question by focusing on foreign immigration, which is one of the most contentious political issues today. This study adds internal migration—a critically important phenomenon in emerging-market countries like China—to the scholarly mix. The prevalence of foreign and internal migration in China provides a useful opportunity to explore some of the previously unexplored observable implications of current arguments about attitudes toward immigration. In particular, the labor-market competition channel—which posits that residents will oppose immigration if they fear for the security of their jobs and wages—should also apply to internal migration, because residents from other provinces should be as economically threatening to local residents as workers from abroad. On the other hand, conationals from other regions who generally speak the same language and engage in similar religious and cultural practices should not instill the sort of threat to national identity that might drive residents to oppose foreign immigration. We explored these questions by conducting an original survey experiment that examined respondents’ opinions toward foreign and internal migration in China. Our nationwide survey randomly assigned respondents to answer questions about skilled or unskilled migration from foreign countries or other provinces in China.

Some of our findings were surprising, while others verified the results from earlier research. Notably, support or opposition to migration did not hinge upon the foreign versus internal dimension. This is the first study to make this claim. It sits uneasily with arguments about the precariousness of national identity as a driver of opposition to migration. One possible explanation for this finding is that the “insider-outsider” distinction is more nuanced in the context of labor mobility than previous studies of immigration would suggest. Individuals need not cross a border to be deemed “outsiders” by local residents. Even conationals can trigger cultural or xenophobic reactions, and perceptions of “foreignness” need not depend on a foreign-domestic distinction.18

18. In China, the hukou system codifies this insider-outsider divide between urban residents and workers from the countryside; by denying certain rights and privileges to outsiders, the system resembles the in-group–out-group tension depicted in Kinder and Kam (2010), minus the centrality of a national border.
We suspect that China is not unique in this regard. Societal tensions arising from the movement of people from the countryside to urban areas during industrialization are a feature of many countries’ histories. While China formalized the second-class status of internal migrants, other countries did so in de facto ways, manifested in the rise of ghettos and by worker discrimination and violence based on socioeconomic and ethnic grounds.19

Another key finding is that respondents in China are more discerning when evaluating foreign migrants than internal ones. Preferences cleave based on migrant skill level, but the intensity of this cleavage is greater for foreign migration. Respondent education amplifies these distinctions.

One of our motivations for this study was to investigate whether the conventional wisdom on public reactions to foreign immigration in Western developed contexts is generalizable beyond those contexts. Our findings support the skepticism of earlier studies of the economic and material drivers of public opinion (e.g., Hainmueller and Hopkins 2015). However, we found scant connection between respondent education and support for migration in general. This might suggest that the cosmopolitan and anti-ethnocentric impact of education so commonly attributed to the US educational system is not universally applicable. On the other hand, residents of China appear less opposed to foreign immigration than their counterparts in the United States or Europe, so there may be less xenophobia to mitigate via education.

Another motivation for this study was to test arguments about immigration in the context of China, the largest country in the world and one of the most dynamic in terms of internal migration. We have done so here, but with important limitations. Because we only cover one country, we do not know whether our findings generalize to other authoritarian countries and developing countries. And because the proportion of foreign migrants is relatively small in many provinces given the large size of the population, economic competition and cultural threat may be less salient compared to smaller countries with more open international borders. We were also unable to cover all aspects of migration, whether internal or foreign. Future studies that experiment with a range of varying characteristics would be helpful to confirm the results of this study. Finally, we hope that our results prompt further studies in other emerging-market countries and in developed countries like the United States. Internal migration within developing countries, especially in Asia, will likely continue its steep increase for many years (Montgomery 2008). In developed countries, a study of attitudes toward workers from poorer states or regions who relocate to richer areas for employment could help determine whether crossing a border is a necessary ingredient for public opposition to migration, or whether an equivalent xenophobic response could be triggered by conationalists as well.

19. See Gaikwad and Nellis (2017) for a discussion and references.
Appendix A. Sample Characteristics

Table A.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2010 National Census</th>
<th>This study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>Median per capita annual disposable income</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>12.69%</td>
<td>13.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>8.76%</td>
<td>9.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>30.24%</td>
<td>27.98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>26.97%</td>
<td>25.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>14.17%</td>
<td>15.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>7.18%</td>
<td>7.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50.52%</td>
<td>52.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–19</td>
<td>4.01%</td>
<td>2.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>21.67%</td>
<td>25.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>20.42%</td>
<td>24.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>21.86%</td>
<td>18.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>15.19%</td>
<td>23.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60–69</td>
<td>9.47%</td>
<td>6.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 or above</td>
<td>7.38%</td>
<td>0.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92.28%</td>
<td>94.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,479</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Appendix B. Experimental Conditions and Question Wording

Low-skilled foreign migration

Do you think the number of low-skilled immigrants from foreign countries who come to China to live should be increased, left the same as it is now, or decreased?

-3 = Decreased to zero
-2 = Decreased a lot
-1 = Decreased a little
0 = Kept the same as it is now
1 = Increased a little
2 = Increased a lot
3 = Increased by a very large amount
High-skilled foreign migration

Do you think the number of high-skilled immigrants from foreign countries who come to China to live should be increased, left the same as it is now, or decreased?

-3 = Decreased to zero
-2 = Decreased a lot
-1 = Decreased a little
0 = Kept the same as it is now
1 = Increased a little
2 = Increased a lot
3 = Increased by a very large amount

Low-skilled internal migration

Do you think the number of low-skilled migrants from other provinces who come to the province or municipality where you are to live should be increased, left the same as it is now, or decreased?

-3 = Decreased to zero
-2 = Decreased a lot
-1 = Decreased a little
0 = Kept the same as it is now
1 = Increased a little
2 = Increased a lot
3 = Increased by a very large amount

High-skilled internal migration

Do you think the number of high-skilled migrants from other provinces who come to the province or municipality where you are to live should be increased, left the same as it is now, or decreased?

-3 = Decreased to zero

20. The foreign migration question asks respondents to assess migration from foreign countries to their country, while the internal migration question asks respondents to assess migration from other provinces to their province. These questions adopt the same format that is used in previous surveys. For example, a standard question from the American National Election Studies (ANES) about attitudes toward immigration asks about “immigrants from foreign countries who are permitted to come to the United States to live,” not about immigrants who are permitted to live in the respondent’s hometown (Citrin et al. 1997). Similarly, Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010, p. 67) ask, “Do you agree or disagree that the U.S. should allow more skilled/unskilled immigrants from other countries to come and live here?” Given that one goal of our research design is to maintain comparability with previous surveys, our foreign immigration questions ask about foreign immigrants who come to China rather than a subnational region. On the possible observable implications of this choice, see the robustness section in the main text.
-2 = Decreased a lot
-1 = Decreased a little
0 = Kept the same as it is now
1 = Increased a little
2 = Increased a lot
3 = Increased by a very large amount

Data Availability Statement

REPLICATION DATA AND DOCUMENTATION are available at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/C1RNTU.

Supplementary Material

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL may be found in the online version of this article: https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab065.

References


