Limits of Multicultural Imagination and the Anti-Refugee Controversy in Contemporary China

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On the World Refugee Day in 2017, Yao Chen, a Chinese actress, philanthropist, and social media influencer, posted messages in her Weibo in support of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Yet, social media users quickly interpreted this supportive message of the refugee program as encouraging people to "accept and receive refugees" (jieshou nanmin) into China. Particularly, the category of Middle Eastern refugees elicited most criticism in China's cyberspace. As the inclusion of refugees is an integral part of immigrant multiculturalism, this article examines the limits of multicultural imagination of refugees—particularly those from the Middle Eastern and North Africa—in contemporary China. I argue that the limits of multicultural imagination in contemporary China is profoundly shaped by an intricate interweaving of domestic policies and global imaginaries toward refugees. By deploying a mixed methodology, such limits are examined from legal-institutional, ideological, and sociocultural perspectives. More specifically, three interrelated aspects will be highlighted in the article: (1) the global circulation of right-wing populism imaginaries, and their entanglements with the anti-Muslim sentiments in contemporary China; (2) the current insufficiency of the legal-institutional framework regarding refugees and asylum-seekers, which needs to be contextualized in China's modern history of dealing with

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refugee issues; (3) population politics, the rise of Han-centric nationalism, and their constraining impact on the interpretation of historical events related to cultural diversity. In conclusion, this article also offers potential implications for further examining the different yet potentially intersected genealogies of multicultural imaginaries beyond the Middle Eastern and North African refugees in Asia.

1. Introduction

> But before you cast the first stone at us, remember that being a Jew does not give any legal status in the world. If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings.

> By Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees" (1943).

On the World Refugee Day in 2017, Yao Chen, a Chinese actress, philanthropist, and social media influencer, posted messages in her Weibo in support of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Yet, social media users quickly interpreted this supportive message of the refugee program as encouraging people to "accept and receive refugees" (*jieshou nanmin*) into China. Particularly, the category of Middle Eastern and North African refugees elicited most criticism in China's cyberspace. What is the "background"—in the Taylorian sense of social imaginary (Taylor, 2007)—that gives rise to the anti-refugee sentiments in contemporary China? How to trace the interconnection between the anti-refugee discourse in the Sinophone cyberspace and the global circulation of Islamophobia? What are the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in China's multicultural imagination, particularly regarding the refugees from the Middle East and North Africa?

This article elaborates on the limits of multicultural imagination and its manifestation through the 2017 anti-refugee controversy in China. By multicultural imagination, I refer to a heterogeneous set of discourses and imaginaries that reflects not only the *de facto* multiculturalist policies of a given state but also the intellectual and public imagination of inclusion and exclusion at large. Specifically, this article examines the imagination of immigrant multiculturalism and its

limits in the context of contemporary China through the investigation of the 2017 refugee controversy. Unlike Europe and North America, Islamophobia in contemporary China does not take the form of the right-wing parties and their anti-Muslim campaigns. Rather, I argue that the limits of multicultural imagination in contemporary China is profoundly shaped by an intricate interweaving of domestic policies and global imaginaries toward refugees, especially manifested through specific policies and the Sinophone cyberspaces.

Specifically, three interrelated aspects—legal-institutional, ideological, and sociocultural—will be highlighted in this article: (1) the global circulation of right-wing populism imaginaries, and their entanglements with the anti-Muslim sentiments in contemporary China; (2) the current insufficiency of the legal-institutional framework regarding refugees and asylum-seekers, which needs to be contextualized in China's modern history of dealing with refugee issues; (3) population politics, the rise of Han-centric nationalism, and their constraining impact on the interpretation of historical events related to cultural diversity.

In terms of methodology, I use a mixed approach—textual analysis, interviews, and archival research—to investigate the limits of multicultural imagination reflected through the 2017 anti-refugee controversy. Firstly, the 2017 anti-refugee controversy mostly emerged as an online phenomenon. The primary media materials are thus collected from digital platforms such as Weibo (one of the biggest Chinese social media platforms and similar to Twitter), Tianya (similar to Reddit and one of the most popular Internet forums in China since 1999), and Zhihu (similar to Quora and China's biggest knowledge-sharing platform). Secondly, archival research help illuminate the background of the refugee controversy in a broader context. Documents regarding legal frameworks and historical archives are found through the official documents, legal academic articles on refugee issues, and my collection of archival materials from the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum. Furthermore, field trips in Northwest China and interviews are crucial to understanding the perspectives of the people who are either directly involved or (in)directly affected by the anti-refugee and anti-Muslim discourses in China. I thus incorporate the interview with an anonymized member from Yao Chen's team and my other interviews with Hui Muslims on anti-Muslim sentiments from 2015 to 2018.

2. Literature Review

Multiculturalism is a loaded and contested concept in both liberal and non-liberal states today. In contemporary Asia, how to deal with groups of diverse political, racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds has increasingly become a tricky issue for different Asian states due to increasing flows of people across national borders and tightening controls of borders at the same time (e.g. Douglass & Roberts 2015; Kim & Oh 2011; Lian 2016; Lie 2014; Prato 2016; Sun, Fitzgerald, & Gao 2018). Defined as an integral part of multiculturalism, immigrant

multiculturalism consists of "proponents [that] emphasize that multiculturalism is compatible with, not opposed to, the integration of immigrants into society; multiculturalism policies provide fairer terms of integration for immigrants" (Song, 2017). While this definition highlights a more positive ("fairer terms of integration") aspect of immigrant multiculturalism, we cannot overlook some systemic failures and their long-term consequences in the Western political spectrum and social fabric (Bauman, 2016; Holmes, 2010). Moreover, the current literature on Islamophobia in China scarcely focuses upon the topic of refugee and asylum seekers through the global circulations of multicultural imaginations.

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims, Islam, and the Middle East have often been indifferentiably lumped together in the Islamophobic discourses in the United States. While scholars and journalists painstakingly show how diverse the Muslim world actually is or how misrepresented Islam is in the Western media, the rise of right-wing populism continue to construct the Muslims as the civilizational, racialized, and gendered other (Bail, 2012; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Holmes, 2010; Kaya & Tecmen, 2019). Particularly, the anti-immigration discourses constitute a significant part of the anti-Muslim sentiments amidst the rise of the far-right movements in Europe or the alt-right movements in the United States (Dennison & Geddes, 2019; Kaufmann, 2019). For instance, the typical anti-refugee discourse in Greece and other European countries often feature "radical Muslims" who would "corrupt the values of European civilization" and who could not be "assimilated" (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris, 2018, p. 1880). Moreover, "young/single Muslim men" are often seen as potential sources for insecurity and instability in the Western society (Kirtsoglou & Tsimouris, 2018, p. 1881). Such multicultural imagination toward Muslims and Islam have profoundly reshaped not the everyday experiences of both Muslims and non-Muslims (Göle, 2015, 2017) but also the national and global imaginaries beyond the Western contexts (Steger, 2008) In contemporary China, these racialized, gendered, global imaginaries also find their resonances in the Sinophone public spheres, especially mediated through digital platforms.

While immigrant multiculturalism mostly focuses on the "prescriptive use [of multiculturalism] in the context of Western liberal democratic societies" (Song, 2017), the framework for multiculturalist discourse in the post-1949 China mainly derives from its population politics and ethnic-religious policies. As shown in McCarthy's work *Communist Multiculturalism* (2011), the *minzu*-oriented framework is a hegemonic yet multi-faceted effort for the state to accommodate ethnic and religious diversity as well as for the ethnic and religious minorities to "assert[ing] citizenship and membership in the national body politic" (9). According to the PRC Constitution, China is a unified multi-ethnic state (*tongyi de duo minzu guojia*) with fifty-six ethnic groups. Han Chinese constitute over 90% of the total population while other fifty-five *minzu* are considered as ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu*) (PRC Constitution, 2004). Meanwhile, the Chinese government officially recognizes five religions of Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, Catholicism, and Islam (Fenggang Yang, 2011). Yet, religious diversity is often conflated with

ethnic issues given that many ethnic minorities are associated with certain religious beliefs. It should be noted that not all ethnic minorities claim to subscribe to a certain religion or religious belief. Neither do people with religious belief necessarily belong to a certain ethnic minority. In terms of institutional infrastructure, the religious affairs are administered through the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (*minzong ju*) under the National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the State Council. Moreover, the secular Chinese state has increasingly downplayed the role of religion and faith in public life since 2013, thus leading to further suppression of religious pluralism in the multicultural politics (Goldstein, 2017; Palmer & Winiger, 2019).

3. Background: Unpacking The 2017 Anti-Refugee Controversy

On May 19th of 2017, a global survey commissioned by the Amnesty International showed that China (85%), Germany (84%), and UK (83%) were the top three countries that most welcomed refugees in neighborhood or household (Amnesty International, 2016). The Amnesty International Secretary General Salil Shetty commented that "governments are not listening to the silent majority of welcoming citizens who take the refugee crisis personally." Ironically, the "silent majority" did take the refugee crisis "personally," at least in China's digital landscape. In June 2017, a public outcry against the refugee program started in Weibo and quickly escalated into a politically charged controversy.

On the World Refugee Day in 2017, Yao Chen, a Chinese actress, philanthropist, and social media influencer, posted messages in her Weibo in support of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Nominated as China's celebrity endorser for the UNHCR in 2010, Yao became the Goodwill Ambassador of China District on the World Refugee Day in 2013. Four years afterwards, Yao attended the UNHCR activity in Beijing and posted the photos and a short comment in her Weibo in support of the "65,600,000 people who lost their home around the world" (translated from Yao's Weibo).

Yet, social media users quickly interpreted this supportive message of the refugee program as encouraging people to "accept and receive refugees" (*jieshou nanmin*) into China. Digging through an earlier report of Yao Chen conducted by *Southern Weekly* in 2011 (Wan, 2011), netizens started to mock Yao as a "Holy Mother," a derogative term in China's social media referring to people who "tolerate, forgive, and sympathize everyone without any principle" (Baidubaike, n.d.). From the perspective of many netizens who criticized Yao, they found the possibility of accepting and receiving refugees as opening door for unwanted immigrants like that in Europe. An informal online poll conducted on Weibo from June 20 to 22, 2017 showed that only 2% voters were "willing to accept refugees" as a response to Yao's post as well as the survey published by the UNHCR (Shi, 2017).

In response to online public opinion, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi clarified the PRC government's position on the refugee issue while meeting with Gebran Bassil, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Lebanon, in Beirut on June 23, 2017. According to Wang Yi, refugees are different from immigrants and would return to their home countries eventually (Ministry of Foreign Relations, 2017). Wang emphasized that the Chinese government would work with the international society under the UN framework to offer assistance. On June 26, Yao Chen followed in her Weibo and released a statement to clarify her own positions. First, she restated that she had never asked China to "accept and receive refugees." Then, she espoused Wang Yi's statement that "refugees are not immigrants" (*nanmin bushi yimin*) and that many refugees around the world shared the same wish to return to their homeland one day. "I often feel fortunate to grow up and live in a peaceful and stable country," Yao wrote, "there is nothing more horrible than wars and nothing sadder than losing one's country" (Gao, 2017).

Despite the statements from Wang Yi and Yao Chen, the outpouring of anger and outrage toward the possibility of accepting and receiving refugees continued to ferment online. Amidst "all the refugees around the world," it is not all refugees that elicit excessive fear and objection among the Chinese netizens. Rather, the politically charged category of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa became the epicenter of anti-refugee controversy in 2017. If Yao Chen's post on the World Refugee Day in 2017 could be seen as a small pebble, it certainly has created widespread ripping effects across different social media platforms in China. While Weibo quickly becomes a major ground for refugee controversy, netizens soon carried the topic in Weibo to other online platforms such as Tianya forum and Zhihu.

4. Mirroring Europe: Entangled Islamophobias

The case of Xi Wuyi, unrelated to Xi Jinping and one of the leading voices in Weibo, toward the 2017 Refugee Controversy is worth exploring here since it offers an apt window for us to further probe into the multilayered Islamophobia in China fueled by the rise of global right-wing populism. According to my research and interviews, Xi Wuyi is not just a representative case; she is also largely responsible for the agitation of the anti-refugee sentiments online. My informants mentioned that there were three stages. In the first stage, some netizens criticized both Yao Chen and the state media for advocating to receive refugees. In the second phase, Xi reposted a netizen's criticism and added her own twist. Thanks to her large following and her verified status as a public intellectual, similar anti-refugee quickly gained ground. Yao Chen became the main target for criticism. In the third phase, Yao Chen issued a statement after Wang Yi's statement. The criticism reduces in velocity and intensity gradually but persists whenever a similar issue comes out.

Xi's trajectory of intellectual and public engagements is telling of her influence in China's public discussion of both ethnic-religious policies and immigrant multiculturalism. In Xi's Weibo account, her self-introduction is "Professor of Marxism Studies from the Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (GSCASS)." Actually, Xi indeed used to work in the

GSCASS as a researcher and has been the Director of the Research Center for Science and Atheism in the same institute since 2010. Xi started her personal blog in Sina, the company which also owns Weibo, in 2012 and later opened her Weibo account in 2013. By March 2020, Xi has a total number of over 2,030,000 followers in Weibo. Although Xi's follower number only amounts to a little over 2% of Yao Chen's in Weibo, that relative difference in number does not diminish the substantial influence Xi exerts in cyberspace over the refugee issue since Xi has been one of the leading anti-Muslim voices in China since the early 2010s.

According to Xi Wuyi, a Weibo user called "Listening to wind and rain amidst chimes during midnight" (*Yeban zhongsheng ting fengyu*) first posted his/her strong opposition to the reception of refugee in China on June 20, 2017. The primary reason was that the Chinese people had sacrificed too much for one child policy for the country and that more refugees would use up more resources. Xi agreed with this Weibo user and reposted his/her Weibo with a statement that "it is the public opinion that China refuses to accept and receive refugees" (Xi, 2017). Within the first day, Xi observed a surge of over 10 million readings. By July 9, 2017, this single post accrued a total reading number of about 21.15 million with the likings of over 150,000.

While Xi acknowledged the most frequently searched words were "refugees," "world," and "one child policy," she quickly highlighted the particular category of "middle eastern refugees" in her subsequent analysis. First, Xi traced the European refugee crisis to the Arab Spring in 2010 and the international responses thereafter. Rather than directly accusing Yao Chen, Xi specifically quoted the result of the Refugee Welcome Index from the Amnesty International and questioned its validity by offering the online survey conducted during the 2017 Refugee Controversy in China. This disparity in the public polling, according to Xi, is a reflection of the international pressures on China to bear the consequences of the Western responsibility in the Middle East. If China succumbs to such "unjustified" pressures, Xi warned that the acceptance of refugees from Middle East and North Africa would not only exhaust resources but also "implant the root of global instability" in China.

Regarding the online survey conducted in June 2017, Xi further questioned the credibility of the 2.5% voters who supported China's acceptance of refugees. Rather than offering specific data on the anonymous voters, Xi called the names of some "Holy Mothers" and "Muslims" who, according to her, constituted the minority of the 2.5%. For example, Luqiu Luwei (also known as Rose Luqiu) from the Pheonix TV and Liu Bo (a Hui Muslim) from the *Financial Times*'s Chinese branch were both publicly identified in Xi's post. As the first female Chinese reporter to cover the 2001 Afghan war, Luqiu is well known in the Sinophone world as a sympathetic voice for the situations in the Middle East. Noticeably, Luqiu and Yang (2017) analyzed ten years of news report related to Islam in China on the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) and over 10,000 Weibo posts related to Islam and Muslims before and after the 2015 European refugee crisis. They found that

the general attitudes toward Muslims and Islam are negative and that the refugee controversy in China further deepened stereotypes of Muslims.

Luqiu and Yang's finding is indicative of the anti-refugee attitude manifested by Xi Wuyi and many of her followers. As Xi puts it,

> The root of the tragedy in Middle East is complex. This region continuously sees fierce conflicts due to the intervention of superpowers. People have been displaced and stateless. The refugee wave is hitting the world, and Europe is the first to suffer. According to our own national conditions, there is no refugee law. Historical experience proves that large-scale admissions of refugees are prone to long-lasting political disasters. Moreover, the Muslim refugees from the Middle East are different from the secular countries due to their religious and cultural backgrounds, which further exacerbates the political nature of refugee situations. Once China accepts refugees from the Middle East at a large scale, it will bring huge cross-border migrant risks! Online public opinion (*wangluo minyi*) can provide a basis for our governance regarding whether or not to draft refugee laws. Such public opinion can also strongly support our country's foreign relations. (Xi, 2017, author's translation)

According to Xi, the "large-scale admissions of refugees" could lead to long-term "political disasters" due to the differences rooted in religious and cultural backgrounds. Such an inference is not surprising given that Xi has a long record of advocating for secularization and Marxist atheism in social media, especially regarding Islam and Muslims.

A thorough reading of Xi's blog posts reveals that Xi's open objection to Islam has to be traced back to 2013 when she started to condemn terrorism (J. Wang, 2019), following the commentary in the *Global Times* (a daily tabloid sponsored by CCP's mouthpiece *People's Daily*). Before 2013, Islam did not show up in Xi's blog posts or academic articles whereas her objects of criticism in the name of science and atheist studies were mostly Christianity and Buddhism. Besides the Marxist framework, she also frequently cited the works by the authors from the Neo-atheist movements in the West, such as Paul Kurtz, Richard Dawkins, and Michael Schmidt-Salomon. With the shift of criticism toward "terrorism" and "Islamic fundamentalism" both in her blog and Weibo, Xi began to gain a much larger following in social media since 2013. Yet, unlike her blog which has perhaps a more diverse citational practice, Xi's Weibo could be characterized as a major ground for "regulating halalization (a term the Chinese government uses to refer to the generalization of the concept of halal in social spheres beyond halal food), combating religious extremism, and breaking the bond between religion and nationality" (*zhili qingzhen fanhua, e'zhi zongjiao jiduan, dapo jiaozu yiti shufu*).

This brief diversion into Xi's intellectual background and social media history is important for our understanding of her anti-refugee position here. If we go back to her basic reasons of

objection above, we can see that the "religious and cultural" differences of the Muslims from the Middle East are highlighted as the root cause of political instability in Europe and, potentially, in China. In a sense, Xi reframes the refugee issue from a question of humanitarianism into that of national security and multicultural recognition in the name of "online public opinion." The echoes of such an acrobatic discursive shift could be clearly felt in other online platforms. For instance, in the Tianya post mentioned earlier, netizens posted:

> Europe is already in chaos. France and Germany are turning green [the "green religion" is a derogative term referred to Islam]. Is it the turn to affect us? (By Yan daguo zhi wei yi xiujing, June 21, 2017)
> [Refugees are] a group of animals who are unwilling to be assimilated. Whoever invites them in would suffer. (By Gugugaga2016, June 24, 2017)

By calling Islam as a "green" religion and Muslims "unwilling to be assimilated," those postings essentialized the religious and cultural differences through a constructed dichotomy between a civilized us and a barbarian other. In this dichotomy, refugees are easily equated to lawless, backward outsiders who would either become "Muslim rapers" or "potential terrorists."

This us-other dichotomy is also observed in the knowledge-sharing platform Zhihu. In her study of 1,038 postings in Zhihu from February 2015 and June 2018, Zhang (2019) shows that the "refugees" and "Muslims" have become two key discursive lynchpins through which the Chinese Internet users appropriate the Western-style right-wing populism in China's cyberspace. Popular terms such as "white left" (*baizuo*) or "holy mother" are deployed to "refer to those who endorse progressive values such as feminist, multiculturalism, equal rights movements and environmentalism in Western societies" (Zhang, 2019, p. 9). As we mention in Introduction, Yao Chen was also criticized as a "Holy Mother" due to her stance in refugee issues. In Zhang's study, she observes a strong correlation between the rising criticism against those tagged as "white left" or "holy mother" and the emergent global events such as the European Refugee Crisis and the American presidential election. Among 1,038 postings, an overwhelming majority (856) of the answers are negative toward "white left," among which the three highest ranked hashtags are "immigration/refugees" (137), "race/racial relations" (114), and "Islam/Muslims" (93) (Zhang, 2019, p. 11). This observation coincides with Luqiu and Yang (2017)'s finding that the overall attitudes toward refugees and Muslims in China's official and social media are negative. The examples of "Muslim rape" and of the "depiction of Sweden as country 'destroyed by Muslim immigrants and feminists'" in the Zhihu postings (Zhang, 2019, p. 8, 13-4) are refashioned through a racialized language to justify the rejection of Muslim refugees into China, thus avoiding the fate of a declining Europe.

5. Legal-institutional constraints: Refugee policies in modern China

Yet, the entangled Islamophobic discourses between China and Europe are not the only factor that shapes the limits of the multicultural imagination in China. This study finds that the legal-institutional lack of a comprehensive, inclusive refugee law also poses serious limits to the acceptance of refugee and asylum seekers in the Chinese society. Based on Yao Chen's Weibo account and my interview of a key informant in Yao's team, they subscribe to this internationally acknowledged definition endorsed by both the UNHCR and the PRC government. Internationally, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967 Refugee Protocol) are the two major international conventions that define the status of a refugee, the rights to be granted asylum, and the responsibility of the asylum-granting countries. The 1951 Refugee Convention mainly referred to the European refugees during the WWII. The 1967 Refugee Protocol lifts the geographical and temporal limits by extending the definition of refugee to anyone "forced to flee their country because of violence or persecution" (UNHCR, n.d.-b).

The history of refugee policies in China can be divided into two periods: the first half of the twentieth century and the post-1949 era. During the World War Two (WWII), China played a vital role in receiving the European Jewish refugees whose stateless status later became the cornerstone for the 1951 Refugee Convention (Kranzler, 1988). In fact, the Chinese government has been actively promoting a cosmopolitan image of China as being open and welcoming to one of the most persecuted minorities—the European Jews during the WWII—since the 1990s. For instance, the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum depicts a picture of the harmonious relationship between the Chinese and the Jews co-living in the Jewish ghetto in Hongkou District in Shanghai (Michaels, 2016). Although China could be rightly considered as a rare haven that remained open for the Jewish refugees during the height of the Nazi atrocity, we should not overlook the historical fact that the existence of Shanghai as a refugee haven was not an intentional policy systematically carried out by the Republic of China government in the 1940s. In other words, the pre-1949 refugee admission in China could not be considered as a legal framework either on China's part or from the perspective of international convention. Rather, it was the result of the power struggle among different forces such as Japan, China, the United States, and Germany in the wartime Shanghai.

After the Japanese army took over Shanghai in 1937, the Republic of China government ceased its *de facto* governance over the city while the Western powers in Shanghai still retained control over their respective concessions. In the 1930s, about 20,000 Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai as one of the two only havens (the other is Dominican Republic) for European Jews after the 1938 Evian Conference (Griffiths, 2013). Ironically, it was precisely because of the power vacuum in Shanghai that Shanghai became such a haven. It is also noticeable that some remarkable individuals such as the then China's consul-general in Vienna Ho Feng-shan (1907-1997) played a crucial role in issuing visa to the stateless Jewish refugees, thus opening a gateway for escape (Pan & Wang, 2002, p. 174). After the Japanese attack on the Pearl Harbor in 1941, however, the Japanese took over all international settlements in Shanghai and further constraining the inflow of

Jewish refugees under its ally Nazi Germany's pressure (Kranzler, 1988, p. 477). In early 1943, the Japanese occupation forces initiated a program to move all stateless Jewish refugees into a "designated area" of less than 2 square kilometers in Hongkou District, which is also known as Shanghai ghetto (Heppner, 1993, p. 113). This restrictive policy finally ended in 1945. In summary, the refugee situation in Shanghai during the WWII is more of a political byproduct of the international failure in protecting the Jewish refugees than of a conscious, systematic policy choice on the side of the Republic of China government at that time.

After most Jewish refugees left China in 1949, the PRC government did not develop a specific set of laws but did start to collaborate with the international organization on refugee issue. In 1982, the PRC signed on the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Refugee Protocol, mainly as an emergent response to the flow of refugees from Vietnam into China during the 1978-9 Sino-Vietnamese conflict (UNHCR, n.d.-a). As the relationship between China and Vietnam deteriorated in 1977, the Vietnamese government started to expel its ethnic Chinese population also known as Hoa kiều (overseas Chinese) or Hoa (Chinese) in Vietnam (Van Chinh, 2017). In *Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility* (Xiang et al., 2013), scholars identify three major types of returnees in Asia: the victims, the desirable, and the ambiguous. In this case, the Chinese refugees from Vietnam could be also characterized as the returning victims due to the political tensions between two Asian countries. By 1979, about 260,000 refugees from Vietnam, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong were re-settled in Guangxi province of Southwest China (Guangxi Archival Committee, 1994, pp. 123, 253). In 1994, the UNHCR collaborated with the Chinese government and started a low-interest loan program to incentivize the employment of the refugees and their descendants (UNHCR, 2007). By 2007, more than 300,000 former Chinese Vietnamese refugees and their descendants lived in China (UNHCR, 2007).

Despite the fact that China now hosts over 400,000 refugees (Zhu & Price 2013, p. 16), the PRC government still has no specific law to deal with asylum seekers and refugee-related issues. Rather, the only formal stipulation related to refugee and asylum is Article 46 from Law on the Administration of Exit and Entry (hereinafter *The 2012 Law*) (Law on the Administration of Exit and Entry [Chujing Rujing Guanli Fa], 2013). It states that "Foreigners applying for refugee status may, during the screening process, stay in China on the strength of temporary identity certificates issued by public security organs; foreigners who are recognized as refugees may stay or reside in China on the strength of refugee identity certificates issued by public security organs." In practice, the Chinese government has worked with the UNHCR to accept a very small number of refugees around the world. The current number is fewer than 200. Since China has no asylum or resettlement camps, refugees disperse and live in the communities assigned by the Chinese government. But those refugees can only stay in China temporarily after their status verified by the UNHCR. They need to register in the public security bureau but cannot obtain legal work permit in China (UNHCR, n.d.-a). As a result, they can only live on the funding allocated by the UNHCR before

being transferred to a third country. In other words, the Chinese government currently only serves as a transfer point/intermediary country for the UNHCR-designated refugees.

Overall, the refugee policy in post-1949 China has three key features. First, China still does not have a comprehensive legal framework specifically pertaining to refugee and asylum issues. While the 2012 exit-entry law does briefly cover the regulation of refugee issue, legal and migration experts point out that the Chinese government is unwilling to make a separate law for refugees and asylum seekers (Pieke et al., 2019; Zhu & Price, 2013, p. 16). Second, the international organization plays an important role in refugee issue in China. More specifically, the PRC government mainly works with the UNHCR to determine the type, number, and funding of the refugees China admits and administers. Third, the ratio among the accepted refugees suggests a strong racial or ethnic bias toward the Han Chinese, such as in the case of the majority of the Vietnamese Chinese refugees in the late 1970s. This racialized approach echoes with the state's preference of the co-ethnic returnees over refugees from Southeast Asia between the 1950s and 1970s (Ho, 2015). These key features also work as the legal preconditions for the 2017 Refugee Controversy. Without a clearly defined domestic legal framework, netizens tended to blame the UNHCR and its goodwill ambassador in China as the external "other" who could potentially bring harm into China.

6. Population politics and Han-centric nationalism

As we discuss in the preceding section, the acceptance of co-ethnic returnees or refugees with Chinese heritage suggests that it is a racially homogenous Chinese nation that many netizens imagined. This particular imagination serves as the point of departure for hostility toward and discriminatory attitudes against refugees from the Middle East. The following two sections further analyze the impact of population politics and Han-centric nationalism on the multicultural imagination in China's cyberspace. In a Tianya post created on June 21, 2017, the post creator uploaded a screen capture of Yao Chen's original message in Weibo one day before and explicitly accused her of "forcing our country to accept and receive refugees" (WSLZY, 2017). Despite the fact that Yao never asked the Chinese government to take any formal action, the Tianya post received over 200,000 hits and over 3,000 responses which predominantly sided with the post creator's position.

In response to this original posting, population (*renkou*) was mobilized as a policy-moral category vis a vis the refugees, especially those from the Middle East in the Tianya forum. Anonymous commentators followed up by stating,

> Our country has this one child policy and aborted so many babies. Is it just because we want to make space for refugees? (By Yiluxiaozu, June 24, 2017)

We have nearly 40 million people who are still in poverty. Let's take care of ourselves first. (By Chao xianshi shijie, June 24, 2017)

In comments, such phrases as the "one-child policy" and "nearly 40 million people" in poverty were often used by Chinese netizens—including the Weibo users—as a legitimate reason for rejecting refugees who might take away "precious" resources "saved up" by the Chinese people who had already "sacrificed" a lot in the name of population. However, this particular discourse around population and its consequences is not unique among the refugee issue in the 2010s.

The PRC government has long mobilized a politico-scientific discourse of population to legitimize its political and economic policies at multiple levels. As Susan Greenhalgh points out, the "population politics" has been central to the reform-era governance in China (2010). More specifically, the idea of "too many people in China" (*zhongguo ren taiduo*) is "a fundamental source of cultural and national identity, a prominent political fact, and a central domain of state policy and politics at every level from the political Center to the locality" (Greenhalgh, 2010, pp. xii). For example, the scarcity of resources and degradation of environment have been one major reason for implementing the one-child policy in the 1980s (Greenhalgh, 2010, pp. 22-3). This technique has been so successful to the extent that an ordinary Chinese would still emotionally and even morally link their personal sacrifice and the national prosperity despite the fact that the Chinese government has already shifted toward the loosening of the one-child policy (Y. Wang, 2020). Consequently, this affective dimension in China's population discourse becomes a potent political and even moral tool to construct an imagined population of the Middle East refugees, a seemingly homogeneous population of potential threat to the national identity and resources of the Chinese people as a whole.

It should be noted that the very rhetoric around population politics in the refugee controversy has also been a contentious topic regarding the ethnic policies in contemporary China. In fact, the current preferential policies toward the ethnic minorities have been one of the key discontent expressed by the Han Chinese toward Muslim minorities in recent years (Greenhalgh, 2008, pp. 56-7). For instance, during the course of my fieldwork in Northwest China between 2015 and 2017, my Han Chinese friends (including some scholars and intellectuals) would express a sense of unfairness when referring to the one-child policy and the bonus points for Hui people (*Huimin*) the national examination system. They would often complain that the Han Chinese sacrificed a lot because they could only have one child while the ethnic minorities—especially Hui nationality (*Huizu*) in Northwest China—could have more than one without penalty. Another illustrative example came when the *2016 China Statistic Yearbook* reported that China's total

fertility rate was only 1.05 in 2015 (Chang & Yang, 2016). Since then, the idea that the Han Chinese fertility rate would further decline whereas the minority population would grow unchecked has become a driving force in the anti-Muslim sentiments online. Some opinions held that the 1.05 fertility rate only applied to Han Chinese and did not include that of the "barbarians and heretics [two terms often used to denigrate Muslims online]" (yzmbyzmb, 2016). The criticism toward Ma Yinchu (1882-1982AD), a Hui scholar and the Father of New Population Theory, remerged in cyberspace such as the biggest question-and-answer platform Zhihu in 2017. Ma Yinchu first proposed the idea that the high-rate population growth in the long run would be detrimental to China's development in 1953. But his idea was dismissed as politically problematic and wasn't welcomed by the government until the 1970s (Greenhalgh, 2008, pp. 56-7). The newly emerged criticism specifically emphasized Ma's identity as Huizu and accused him as being hypocritical in theory while having many children in real life (Zhihu Topic, 2017). In other words, the discourse of population politics and ethnic policies not only provide a convenient launchpad for the anti-refugee sentiments but also become a pretext for further breeding Islamophobia online.

Such a shift in the population politics from external Muslim refugees to internal Muslim minorities is no coincidence. Han-centric nationalism has been increasingly constraining the multicultural imagination in recent years. Chinese netizens constantly refer to the historical precedents in the Chinese history to legitimize their fear toward the potential inflow of refugees from outside China. For instance, in the aforementioned Tianya post in 2017, a netizen called "prophecy/easy word comes truth" (*Yiyu Chengzhen*) copied and pasted the following comment many times under others' responses,

> Uprising of the Five Barbarians (304-316AD), An Lushan Rebellion (755-763AD), and Hui Rebellions (1862-1877AD) were all caused by the invasion of the barbarians into China. (WSLZY, 2017)

In the quote above, three historical incidents were listed as examples of the "barbarian invasions" into China at different periods. A first sight of these associations may leave us wonder: what similarities do those examples share? How can we interpret such use of historical events in the context of the 2017 Refugee Controversy?

For the first question, let us quickly go over the three examples listed above. The Uprising of the Five Barbarians (*wuhu luanhua*) refers to a series of conflicts between the ethnic groups and the Jin rulers (265-420AD) in North China. The local and large-scale conflicts intermittently lasted over a hundred years, which ended in the toppling of the Western Jin dynasty, massive human migration from the north to the south, and the establishment of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-398AD) by the Xianbei group in the north. Later during the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), the An Lushan Rebellion brought devastating consequences to the empire. Despite other reasons leading

to political collapse, often noted by the later historians is the fact that General An Lushan was a Sogdian who commanded a considerable force with mixed ethnic groups disloyal to the central kingdom (Pulleyblank, 2018). Yet, it is worth mentioning that the Tang emperors also got considerable assistance from their allies in today's Central Asia. Muslim mercenaries were recruited to fight against the anti-Tang forces and settled in the Tang Empire afterwards. Today's Hui Muslims in China mark this large inflow of Central Asian soldiers as part of their early ancestry in China (Dillon, 2013).

The third example, the Hui Rebellions, refers to a series of regional conflicts in Northwest and Southwest China in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912AD). Also known as Dungan Rebellions, Panthay Rebellions or Tongzhi Hui Revolt, the Hui Rebellions ended in a massive death toll—in Shaanxi province alone, only about 20,000 Hui Muslims survived by the late 1870s whereas there had been over one million Hui before 1862 (Han, 2006). Almost the same amount of the Hui perished in Yunnan in the period from 1856 to 1873 (Atwill, 2005). Notably, the reduction of the Han population was no less significant during the ethnic killings, war casualty, famine, and migration (Ma, 1993). My summary of the three examples cannot possibly capture the full complexity of those historical events, but what I want to highlight here is the similar logic of historical interpretation behind the usage of such events in the anti-refugee rhetoric.

By likening the inflow of foreign refugees to the ethnic or dynastic conflicts in the ancient history, the anti-refugee rhetoric invokes a "civilizing" discourse immanent in the rise of Han-centric nationalism in recent years. As Stevan Harrell defines it, a "civilizing project…is a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality" (Harrell, 2013, p. 4). In other words, the impulse to civilize the "peripheral peoples"—ethnic groups both in the pre-modern and modern Chinese history—constitutes as a teleological rationale for devising ethnic policies and imagining ethnic minorities as the other. While the definition of a "civilizing project" mostly refers to the ethnic minorities inside China, the "civilizing" discourse has been quickly extended—however strenuously—to foreigners whose race, ethnicity, or religion differ from an imagined homogenous group of Han Chinese. In other words, the racialized multicultural imagination finds its concrete expressions through China's population politics and Han-centric nationalism. "Han identity is imagined as a historically evolved, given identity that binds people through common ancestors and shared destiny" (Joniak-Luthi, 2015, p. 14). In the three historical examples quoted from Tianya, the "Five Barbarians," An Lushan and his Sogdian soldiers, and Hui Muslims whose ancestry could trace back to Arabia, Persia, and Central Asia are all seen as the sources of instability and disruption to the "shared destiny" of the "centralizing center." This imagination of Han-centric identity is further buttressed by popular movements such as the Hanfu Movement (Carrico, 2017) and the growth of cyber-nationalism in the digital era (Cheng, 2011; Fang & Repnikova, 2018).

7. Further Discussion and Conclusion

The 2017 outpouring of anti-refugee sentiments in China welds the discursive lynchpins of "refugees" and "Muslims" into a homogenous, potentially dangerous other in China's cyberspace. While the European refugee crisis is often used as a master trope for the rise of anti-refugee sentiments in China, it is important to see how the Islamophobic discourse from the West is imagined and localized in the Chinese context. The global rise of right-wing populism has further fueled the debates over multiculturalism and minority issues in the China's media platforms, thus providing a hotbed for the fermentation of the anti-refugee discourse in China.

Another distinctive feature of China's current mode of multiculturalist discourse is its lack of legal-institutional infrastructure for immigrant multiculturalism, particularly regarding the refugees and asylum seekers. The history of migration in China is very different from countries founded on settler colonialism and/or who advocate for liberal forms of multiculturalism explicitly in their policies. In a sense, immigrants play a key role in defining the contours of multiculturalist imagination in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia (Kymlicka, 2000; Song, 2017; Taylor, 1994). Within the discourse of immigrant multiculturalism, refugees come to the foreground of what it means to be (or not) multicultural and inclusive in a given state. As Arendt points out, refugees are stateless people deprived of their rights as national citizens and thus rendered as an ultimate other in the world of nation states (1973, pp. 294-5, 451). In other words, the policies and imaginaries of the refugee issue reflects the ultimate boundaries of a given state in today's world. Currently, the PRC government still lacks a comprehensive legal-institutional framework to address the issue of refugees. This institutional lack further constrains the multicultural imagination in policy making and public opinion as shown in the 2017 anti-refugee controversy.

Furthermore, the 2017 anti-refugee controversy in China's cyberspace helps illuminate the ethnic boundary-making built within the multicultural imaginaries beyond the PRC. The discussion of refugee-returnees in mobility and inter-Asian studies, though not the focus in this article, is pertinent to the future studies of the multicultural imagination in China. In her study of China's "refugee-returnees" from Southeast Asia between 1949 and 1979, Ho notices the Chinese government's emphasis of returnee over refugee at multiple levels (Ho, 2013, 2015). Institutionally, it is the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (*Qiaoban*) that takes charge of all refugee-returnees rather than the National Immigration Administration (also known as the Exit and Entry Administration or *Yiminju*) (E. L.-E. Ho 2015, p. 534). *Qiaoban* is an administrative office of the State Council while *Yiminju* is an executive agency under the Ministry of Public Security underneath the directive of the State Council. Under this institutional setting, the Chinese government uses a discourse of "returnees" or "overseas Chinese who return to China" (*guiqiao*) to eclipse the discourse of refugees in a dual sense. As Ho puts it, "the Chinese state labelled the co-ethnic

refugees from Southeast Asia as 'returnees', thus helping to legitimize both an extraterritorial claim over them and the domestic preferential resettlement policies it provided for them" (2015:534). On the one hand, the discourse of co-ethnic returnees further extends the meaning of Chineseness in the cultural-symbolic and geopolitical senses. On the other hand, this discourse of returnees reflects the state's attempt to assimilate the refugee-returnees into the *minzu*-oriented model within the PRC, treating them on a similar basis as ethnic minorities in terms of ideological representations and economic policies of resettlement and development. This gymnastic eclipsing of refugees through a discourse of co-ethnic returnees makes it even harder for the Chinese netizens to adopt a more inclusive language of immigrant multiculturalism open to refugees of different backgrounds other than those with Chinese heritage.

Since it is the Muslim refugees who became the major target of fear and rejection in 2017 in the China's public spheres, this article also offers a comparative perspective to understand the limits of multicultural imagination toward other ethnic groups in China or toward Muslim refugees in other Asian states. For instance, with the arrival of over 500 Yemeni asylum seekers in South Korea's Jeju island in 2018, new waves of anti-refugee discourses also broke out online through petitions and criticisms (Ghani, 2008; Kwon, 2019). To what extent will this wave of Islamophobic discourses influence the legal-institutional framework via the Refugee Act? How can the multicultural imagination in South Korea accommodate ethnic and religious differences through (im)mobile Muslim populations in the future? These questions remain to be further explored in a broader Asian context. On the other hand, it is noticeable that African and black immigrants have also become a major target of xenophobia and racist reactions in China since the 2000s, particularly during COVID-19 (Castillo & Amoah, 2020; Cheng, 2011, 2019; Dikötter, 1992; Mathews et al., 2017). More studies still need to be done for understanding, for instance, whether there are substantial links between the growth of the anti-African racism in recent years (especially regarding the controversy over "undocumented" or "illegal" immigrants) and the limits of multicultural imagination manifested through the 2017 anti-refugee controversy. Only by further examining the different yet potentially intersected genealogies of multicultural imaginaries can we start to expand the boundaries of our shared destiny as human beings. After all, as Arendt points out, "we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings."

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