




# Lost in translation: how comparing the uses of the term ‘foreigner’ can help explain China’s immigration policy shift

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Received: 10 February 2021 / Accepted: 31 March 2022 / Published online: 23 April 2022  
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## Abstract

Scholars normally explore China’s international migration policy through a pure social sciences lens. This article aims to investigate the policy evolution trajectory, adding a linguistic viewpoint. It explores the question of how the word ‘foreigner’ changed to reflect shifting policies. Theoretically, it engages historical institutionalism and focuses on the critical junctures in Chinese history, especially after 1949. Methodologically, it uses document interrogation. To collect data, it mainly relies on Chinese encyclopaedic dictionaries (e.g. *The Great Chinese Dictionary*, *Chinese Etymology Dictionary*), Chinese historical ancient books, the Peking University Law database [PKULAW] and some regulation compilation books. In China, a variety of words can signify ‘foreigner’ (*Waiqiao*, *Waiguoren*, *Yimin*), yet each word has another connotation. *Waiqiao* suggests that China regards foreigners from an ethnic and cultural perspective, revealing an ethnic orientation of the policy makers in Chinese immigration policies in the 1950s. *Waiguoren* has a more political undertone and strengthens the administrative orientation of immigration policies after the 1960s. While, as a more recent phenomenon, the use of *Yimin* is a sign for the turn of integration-oriented policies. By differentiating those terms and clarifying their applications in different historical periods, we expect to unveil a clear link between the use of the different terms and China’s immigration policy changes.

**Keywords** China’s immigration policy · Foreigners in China · China’s foreigner policy · Translation for ‘foreigner’ · Chinese translation for ‘immigrant’

## Abbreviations

IOM	International Organization for Migration
PKULAW	Peking University Law Database
PRC	The People’s Republic of China

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## Introduction

In the study of China's immigration policy, it is common for scholars to focus on policy and immigrant groups from either a political science viewpoint (e.g. Brady 2000; Liu and Chen 2015) or a sociological viewpoint (e.g. Mathews et al. 2017, p. 180). However, only few researchers add a linguistic point of view.

There are different words signifying 'foreigner' in China. *Waiguoren* can be used in all cases to indicate immigrants. It literally translates as 'foreigner'. However, if we have a closer look, we can find more words that refer to the same translated term. *Waiqiao*, which directly means 'foreign diasporas', is also used in some historical law texts. Another term, *Yimin*, however, is seldom used in Chinese official texts, despite its translation as 'migrant'. Besides these broad terms, there are other forms of reference that can be used to mean foreigners, such as *Wairen*, *Waiyi*, and *Waibin*. All these terms are synonyms of each other, inasmuch as they are all used to indicate persons who are not the host country's citizens.

In practice, *Waiguoren* is used most widely compared to the other words. It can contain many different categories of foreign individuals, including diplomatic representatives, consular officers, foreign students, *Waiqiao* etc. (New Dictionary of Common Laws 2016, p. 622). But in China's Law Dictionary, *Waiguoren* is juxtaposed with *Waiqiao*. This inappropriate application of *Waiqiao* along with other words can actually lead to a confused situation of the terms of reference for foreigners, which even influential publishers cannot avoid.

As the meanings of these terms cannot be the same, the words can convey different policy information. When we carefully review official texts—more specifically Chinese laws, administrative regulations or departmental rules—it is interesting to see that the different terms used to describe 'foreigners' over time go hand in hand with policy change. In the recent past, there were two main terms used, *Waiqiao*, and *Waiguoren*. Another term, *Yimin*, has only shown up in the last years.

Actually, the evolution of China's migration policy is even more obvious when attention is paid to the names of China's relevant authorities. In 1950, China's Public Security Department established the provincial '*Waiqiao* Administration Section' (Sun 2009, p. 329). In 1959, when entry and transit visas were handed over from the foreign affairs department to the public security organ, the '*Waiqiao* Management Section' was changed to '*Waiguoren* Affairs Administration Section' (ibid. 2009, p. 329). In September 1983, this changed into the Administration of Entry-Exit and Foreigners (*Waiguoren*), mainly responsible for the administration of foreigners and the entry-exit of Chinese citizens (Liu 2009). Most recently, the National Immigration (*Yimin*) Administration was created in 2018. Each establishment of a new authority also meant a (prior) change in policy—hence the change in the denomination of 'foreigner' from *Waiqiao* through *Waiguoren* to *Yimin*.

This paper therefore aims to explore China's immigration policy evolution trajectory, adding this linguistic viewpoint. It is divided into six sections. Besides the introduction, there is a literature review in which the research gap

for the different terms is unveiled. The third section deals with the data collection method and the research design, with a focus on historical institutionalism and a creative link between political science and linguistics. The fourth section introduces the different terms indicating ‘foreigners’ in China. In this section, the changing meaning of the terms, mainly *Waiqiao*, *Waiguoren*, and *Yimin*, will be analysed. At the same time, their respective links with China’s immigration policy will be discussed. In chapter five, these links are further analysed and categorized, unveiling the tight link between the policies and the used terms. The sixth section provides a conclusion.

## The word ‘foreigner’ in academic literature

Most Chinese migration literature, both from immigration or emigration perspective, discuss the social economic field in which migrants interact. It is common for scholars to explore migrants in China based on their ethnic background and their gathering communities (see for example Mathews et al. (2017) on African immigrants in Guangzhou). Other scholars try to give a more comprehensive view from a political science perspective: e.g. Liu and Chen (2015) on China’s immigration policy; Liu (2009) on the development of China’s migration law since 1949; Zhu and Qian (2020) giving an overall view and bridging internal and international migration. Chinese domestic migrants are also frequently examined: e.g. Xue and Huang (2015) on policies for street business.

However, concerning the different terms for foreigners, only a few scholars have noted their different connotations when discussing China’s migration policies. Liu and Chen (2015), for instance, stated that there is no *Migrant* concept in an official context. Instead, they claimed that the term *Waiguoren* (*Foreigner*) has historically been used. *Waiguoren* has a cultural meaning that is similar to the concept ‘non-local person’, which represents a kind of attitude of geopolitical defence (ibid. 2015, p. 2). Pieke (2014) also noticed various terms used to define the category of foreigners in China. However, none of the scholars clarify the different applications of each term.

In the field of linguistics, scholars tend to separately discuss the terms of foreigners. Bi (2000) discussed whether it is proper or not to use the phrase—*Laowai* for indicating a group of foreigners in spoken Chinese. Besides the alleged appropriateness of *Laowai*, Bi also pointed out the negative connotation of the word *Waiguoren*—a sense of alienation and heterogeneity (Bi 2000, p. 35). Yang (2013), on the other hand, scrutinized the legal English translation of the term *Waiguoren*.

Current research, therefore, leaves a research space for the terminology of foreigners and its connection with China’s immigration policy.

## Research design

Historical institutionalism is a political theoretical framework which emphasizes on the concept of moment in time and the following events in analysing political institutional changes (Fioretos et al. 2016, p. 1). How institutions are established and

developed is the central question for historical institutionalists (ibid. 2016, p. 2). As a theoretical approach, historical institutionalism has been applied enormously in studying American and European Union political development, contributing essentially to comparative politics (ibid. 2016, p. 2).

On the analytical dimension, critical junctures, especially, have become the main research focus for historical institutionalists (Fioretos et al. 2016, p. 2). They emphasize on changes that link strongly with either political or economic mechanisms (ibid. 2016, p. 2).

This theoretical approach therefore is suitable to apply in the case of China when considering the foreigner terms change and its immigration policy shifts. Bearing in mind the background of China's institutional evolution and the point of time for the different application of foreigner terms in official texts, can thus shed light on the puzzles in China's immigration policy system.

Specially, this paper introduces the linguistic viewpoint in explaining the political phenomenon. Using both the political science approach and a linguistic viewpoint can serve as a good mix of methodology in this paper.

Data collection method is relying on 'document interrogation'. In order to search for the terminological evolution of the terms for foreigners, Chinese dictionaries are the primary data sources. Chinese encyclopaedic dictionaries (e.g. *The Great Chinese Dictionary*, *Chinese Etymology Dictionary*), Modern Chinese dictionary (e.g. *Advanced Chinese Dictionary*, *Modern Chinese Dictionary*), and more specific dictionaries (e.g. *New Dictionary of Common Laws: Case Application Edition*) are frequently consulted. Besides, Chinese ancient books become important data sources for sorting out the historical implications of those terms, which can also corroborate the explanations in dictionaries.

Data related to China immigration policies are obtained through the PKULAW database and regulation compilation books and chronicles. For the most updated information, government websites (e.g. the website of Chinese Public Security Ministry) constitute the most reliable data sources.

By differentiating the terms used to indicate 'foreigners' and by clarifying their applications in different historical periods, we expect to unveil China's immigration policy changes.

## Referring to foreigners in China

In Chinese official texts, the term *Waiqiao* is mainly used in historical law texts from the 1950s to the 1960s. The term *Waiyuoren* becomes dominant in Chinese government texts after the 1960s. The term *Yimin*, commonly used to indicate international migrants, most often represents *internal* migrants in China, especially those known as *Reservoir Migrants*. Only recently has the term *Yimin* been used to designate the 'international migrant' by Chinese media and in Chinese official documents.

## Waiqiao (foreign diasporas)

### The semantic development of the word *Waiqiao*

*Waiqiao* is the abbreviation of *Waiguo Qiaomin*, literally translated as ‘foreign diasporas’. In order to understand *Waiqiao*, it is thus necessary to understand the Chinese term *Qiaomin*. The meaning of *Qiaomin* has changed several times in history. But the core connotations remain defined culturally and ethnically.

*Qiaomin* initially had a very narrow meaning. As a word, it can be traced back to the time of the Eastern Jin Dynasty (AC 317–420) and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (AC 386–589). It indicates the Northern persons who were exiled to the regions of the Yangtze River during those dynasties. The sentence *Shisui, Shike Nan Xuzhou Qiaomin Zu* is recorded in the *Book of Song* (Shen 1997, cited in Luo 2008, p. 1671), which refers to the government levying taxes on *Qiaomin* according to a prescribed amount and time.

The meaning of *Qiaomin* was expanded later and could generally refer to people living outside their hometown. These *Qiaomin* were normally targeted in the call-up of labourers in ancient China. The *New History of the Tang Dynasty* describes to some extent the life status of *Qiaomin*. For example, *Suzong Jiazhi, Zhuobai Yushi Dafu, Fuwei Jingzhaoyin, Qiandao Weibei Mu Qiaomin* (Ouyang and Song 1997, p. 2884) means that the relevant government official went to the northern area of the Wei river in order to recruit ‘outsiders’ there. It is thus clear that *Qiaomin* in the Tang Dynasty (AC 618–907) has become a general term of reference to ‘outsiders’.

In modern times, the connotation of *Qiaomin* has been narrowed again. It now refers to individuals who live in another country but still retain their original nationality (Modern Chinese Dictionary 1980, p. 443; Luo 2008, p. 1671). By this definition, persons who live outside their hometown but still in the same country are no longer regarded as *Qiaomin*.

What should be noticed here is that *Qiaomin* has a strong ethnic orientation. When this word is used, it is always connected with a certain nationality. It is common for Chinese to refer to Chinese diasporas in other countries as *Qiaomin* or *Huaqiao*. When foreigners live in China, they can also be called *Qiaomin*, but most often they are called *Waiqiao* in order to distinguish them from Chinese diasporas.

There are even some writers who specifically use *Qiaomin* to distinguish it from *migrant*. For example, Lin (2014) wrote that ‘In 1882, the US Congress lay aside the entry law for Chinese workers. Even though they had lived in America, they have no citizenship, and have to live with the identity of *Qiaomin*’ (Lin 2014, p. 12). Here, Lin thought of *Qiaomin* as a group of people who do not have the same rights as *Migrants*, so he uses *Qiaomin* instead of *Migrant* when he describes the initial Chinese migrants in America at the end of the nineteenth century. This usage of *Qiaomin* may easily cause confusion if readers do not understand *Qiaomin* from an ethnic perspective.

## ***Waiqiao* and ethnic oriented immigration policy**

*Waiqiao* was the first official reference to foreigners used in law texts of the People's Republic of China (PRC). It was frequently used during the establishment of China's immigration policy system.

In 1950, Public Security Departments at the provincial level throughout China began to establish '*Waiqiao* Administration sections' within their public security offices (Sun 2009, p. 329). Correspondingly, in the 1950s, the Chinese government released a series of rules related to *Waiqiao*. The first interim rule for immigration in 1951—*Interim Rules for Entry, Exit and Residence for Foreign Qiaomin*<sup>1</sup> was using foreign *Qiaomin*, namely *Waiqiao* (Liang 2016, p. 45). On the 10th of August 1954, this general interim rule was divided into three new interim rules for the residence, travel and exit of *Waiqiao* respectively,<sup>2</sup> namely (1) Interim Procedures of Residence Registration and Residence Permit Issuance for Foreign *Waiqiao*; (2) Interim Procedures of travelling for Foreign *Waiqiao*; and (3) Interim Procedures for exit of Foreign *Waiqiao* (ibid. 2016, pp. 88–92).

The local chronicles of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region also show that the word *Waiqiao* was used for all foreigners in the jurisdiction of the local public security bureau in 1950s (Public Security Bureau of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region 2008, p. 1837).

When speakers want to specifically point out the diasporas' nationality, their country's name will be added in front of the word *Qiaomin*. When citizens of the Soviet Union stayed in China during the 1950s and 1960s, they could be called Soviet *Qiaomin*, abbreviated as '*Su Qiao*'. The government issued many directives about those people during the early days of the creation of the PRC. For example, in order to deal with voting rights of Overseas Soviet people who had already lived in China for many years, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China released the *Directive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Voting Rights of Overseas Soviet Residents in Xinjiang*<sup>3</sup> in 1953 (Party Documents Research Office of the CPC Central Committee and CPC Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Committee 2010, p. 102). In relation to marriage issues, in 1952 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also answered the question of how to manage the marriages of '*Su Qiao*' in China—*The General Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Should Apply Marriage or Divorce of Suqiao in Accordance with the Marriage Law of China*<sup>4</sup> (References to Civil Procedure Law 1981, p. 368). UK citizens in China can be called '*UK Qiaomin*' (abbreviated to '*Ying Qiao*') (Xu 2014, p.

<sup>1</sup> Its Chinese pinyin is '*Waiguo Qiaomin Churu Ji Juliu Zanxing Guize in Chinese*'.

<sup>2</sup> The three interim rules are (1) *Interim Procedures of Residence Registration and Residence Permit Issuance for Foreign Immigrants* (*Waiguo Qiaomin Juliu Dengji Ji Juliu Zheng Qianfa Zanxing Banfa*); (2) *Interim Procedures of travelling for Foreign Immigrants* (*Waiguo Qiaomin Lvxing Zanxing Banfa*); and (3) *Interim Procedures for exit of Foreign Immigrants* (*Waiguo Qiaomin Chujing Zanxing Banfa*).

<sup>3</sup> This directive was released on the 12th of August 1953. The Chinese pinyin for this directive is '*Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Xinjinag Suqiao Xuanjuquan Wenti de Zhishi*'.

<sup>4</sup> This reply's Chinese pinyin is '*Waijiaobu Bangongting Fugao Suqiao Shenqing Jiehuo huo Lihun ying an Woguo Huyinfa Banli*'.

249). It is also common for other cultural or regional people to be named as their region's *Qiaomin*. People from the Arab region, for example, are referred to as 'Arabic *Qiaomin*' (Liu et al. 2015, p. 254).

Since *Qiaomin* can also indicate *Huaqiao* in certain occasions, it is also necessary to clarify the difference between *Qiaomin* and *Huaqiao*. *Huaqiao* clearly refers to Chinese nationals living in other countries. *Huaqiao* has been defined in China's law—the *Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Returned Overseas Chinese and Their Relatives*<sup>5</sup>—in such a way as to protect Chinese diasporas. Article 2 of that law directly mentions that *Huaqiao* means Chinese citizens who live overseas. When citizenship is unknown but the context provides a hint or sign that what is meant is Chinese diasporas in another country, writers can only use *Qiaomin*. If Chinese citizenship is known, they need to use *Huaqiao*. But in practice, when discussing overseas Chinese people, *Qiaomin* and *Huaqiao* often show up together. For example, the Xinhua News Agency often uses these two terms together to refer to the same group of overseas Chinese (International Department of Xinhua News Agency 2016, p. 190).

In the early period after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, there were no nationality laws or regulations adopted. Nationality, therefore, hadn't been explicated from a legal dimension. Under the background of the absence of a jurisprudential understanding of nationality, the adaptation of *Waiqiao* in Chinese immigration policies in the 1950s clearly revealed an ethnic orientation of the policy makers.

### The disappearance of *Waiqiao* from immigration policy

Following the resolving of the 'dual nationality' problem for ethnic Chinese in other countries, *Qiaomin*, along with *Waiqiao*, gradually disappeared from the political landscape since the end of the 1950s.

'Dual nationality' is formed following the first nationality law in China released by the Qing government in 1909 (Miao and Lu 2012, p. 151). The *Nationality Regulations of the Qing Dynasty*<sup>6</sup> set the principle of *Jus sanguinis* for Chinese nationality, which means that a person automatically obtains Chinese nationality if one of his/her parents is Chinese (Ren 2014). While the bulk of the Southeast Asian countries, where most overseas Chinese settled, adopted the principle of *Jus soli*, meaning that a person obtains the nationality from the country where he/she is born (ibid. 2014). The two different rules objectively produced a 'dual nationality' problem.

However, neither the Qing government (end in 1912), the Nanjing temporary government (January 1912–April 1912), the Beiyang government (1912–1928) nor the Nanking National Government (1927–1948) adopted measures to figure out the legal problems caused by the de facto 'dual nationality'.

Only in 1954 the PRC began to solve those problems. In order to release the political pressure from Southeast Asian countries concerning the 'dual nationality',

<sup>5</sup> The Chinese pinyin of this law is 'Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Guiqiao Qiaojuan Quanyi Baohuifa'. It was issued on 31st of October in 2000 by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

<sup>6</sup> The Chinese pinyin of this law is 'Daqing Guoji Tiaoli'.

China first signed an agreement in 1955 with Indonesia: the *Treaty Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Indonesia on Dual Nationality* (Li et al. 2016) in which they no longer advanced the principle of *Jus Sanguinis*. As a consequence, a 'dual nationality' was no longer recognized (Li et al. 2016). China also solved the problem of 'dual nationality' with more countries, e.g. Nepal in 1956, Mongolia in 1957, Malaysia in 1974, the Philippines and Thailand in 1975 (ibid. 2016). 'Overseas Chinese' are therefore no longer recognized as Chinese nationals. Noteworthy is that from that moment on, these overseas Chinese are referred to in official texts as *Huaren*, and no longer as *Huaqiao*. Once more, we see a link between the policy change and the word change used to describe 'foreigners'.

From another point of view, it is also a jurisprudential cutting of ethnicity from the immigration legal system. *Waiqiao* and *Qiaomin* are words with a strong ethnic orientation, and therefore less suitable for use in legal texts that no longer focus on ethnicity. Politically, the perspective on foreigners before that time was ethnic and the political instruments were those designed to channel ethnic Chinese who lived overseas. Gradually, political instruments to govern individuals that did not hold Chinese nationality came into place, and so the words to denote these new policies needed to be adapted. The terms *Waiqiao* and *Qiaomin*, used in China's initial immigration policy system needed more neutral substitutes in the next stage.

## Waiquoren (foreigner)

### The semantic development of *Waiquoren*

*Foreigner* in Chinese is *Waiquoren*, which is a word defined from a political perspective. According to the Law Dictionary (2016), the word for *foreigners*—*Waiquoren*—represents individuals who do not hold the host country's nationality but rather another country's nationality (New Dictionary of Common Laws 2016, p. 622). From the perspective of linguistics, according to Liu et al. (2001, p. 7), *Waiquoren* can be regarded as a nominal phrase. It is a phrase constituted by two words: *Waiquo* (which translates in English as 'foreign') and *Ren* (which translates as 'people'), of which 'Ren' is the head noun. So, the function of *Waiquoren* is coherent with *Ren*. The fact that 'foreigners' in Chinese is not a word but a phrase can explain why Chinese dictionaries (e.g. the Great Chinese Dictionary, Chinese Etymology Dictionary, Modern Chinese Dictionary) do not have an entry for *Waiquoren*.

What is more, *Waiquoren* as a phrase did not enter the Chinese language system for a long time, which is why we cannot find references to it in historical Chinese dictionaries. The Great Chinese Dictionary's principle in collecting words is 'absorbing both the ancient and modern Chinese words and paying equal attention to both the source and course' (Fu 1994). It puts the historic Chinese in a high position in the process of compiling the dictionary (ibid. 1994). The Chinese Etymology Dictionary, from the beginning of its compilation in 1908 in the Qing Dynasty, places emphasis on tracing the source (Chinese Etymology Dictionary 1998, p. 1). Even though it was revised several times after 1958, the aim of this dictionary is still to act as a reference when reading ancient books (ibid. 1998, p. 1). Though



*Waiyuoren* is not collected in these two historical Chinese dictionaries, in Chinese history there are several other words to represent foreigners, e.g. *Wairen*, *Waiyi*, and *Waibin*.

### From *Waiqiao* to *Waiyuoren*: turn of administration-oriented immigration policy

Because historical dictionaries do not have an entry for *Waiyuoren*, it is difficult to trace how *Waiyuoren* has replaced other words in contemporary Chinese—both in the written and oral language systems. But ‘foreigner’ is a word defined in a strongly political sense, having been formed following the creation of a nation.

The replacement of *Waiqiao* by *Waiyuoren* was initiated by government institutions. The most obvious evidence is the functional transfer from the foreign affairs department to the public security department in 1959. When visa-processing was transferred, the ‘*Waiqiao* Administration Section’ was renamed to ‘*Waiyuoren* Affairs Administration Section’ (Sun 2009, p. 329). The name change was representative for China’s changing immigration policy system in the initial decade after the creation of PRC.

In the then current Chinese law system, *Waiyuoren* substituted for the *Waiqiao* of the 1960s. In 1964, at the time when China decided to release a formal regulation on managing foreigners in China, the name of the regulation—*Regulations on the Administration of Entry, Exit, Transit, Residence and Travel for Foreigners*<sup>7</sup>—saw the beginning of the use of *Waiyuoren*, rather than *Waiqiao*, which had been used in the four interim rules about foreigners in the 1950s (see above). Since then, *Waiyuoren* has become a fixed form of address in Chinese law. In 1985, China announced its first law on *Waiyuoren*—*Law of the People’s Republic of China on Control of the Entry and Exit of Foreigners (read: Waiyuoren)*.<sup>8</sup> Even when this law was annulled by the announcement of the 2013 *Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People’s Republic of China*,<sup>9</sup> the term *Waiyuoren* remained in the implementation rule of the law. *Regulations of the People’s Republic of China on Administration of the Entry and Exit of Foreigners*<sup>10</sup> is the current law in effect for the administration of

<sup>7</sup> This regulation’s Chinese pinyin is ‘*Waiyuoren Rujing Chujing Guojing Juliu Luxing Guanli Tiaoli*’. It was approved by the 141st Session of the Plenary Meeting of the State Council on 12th of February in 1964, ratified by the 114th Session of the Standing Committee of the Second National People’s Congress on 13th of March in 1964, and promulgated by the State Council on 13th of April in 1964. Retrieved via the website of National People’s Congress (NPC) [http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/gongbao/1964-04/13/content\\_1478332.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/gongbao/1964-04/13/content_1478332.htm). Accessed 12th April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> This law’s Chinese pinyin is ‘*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Waiyuoren Rujingchujing Guanlifa*’. It was issued on the 22nd of November in 1985. Available via PKULAW (English version). <http://en.pkulaw.cn/Display.aspx?lib=law&Cgid=2613>; (Chinese version) [http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/wxzl/2000-12/06/content\\_4463.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/wxzl/wxzl/2000-12/06/content_4463.htm). Accessed 20th April 2019.

<sup>9</sup> This law’s Chinese pinyin is ‘*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Chujing Rujing Guanlifa*’. It was approved at the 27th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 11th National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China on the 30th of June in 2012 and was issued on 1st of July in 2013. Available via the official website of the China Consular Affairs (both the English edition and Chinese edition). <http://cs.mfa.gov.cn/zlbg/flfg/crjxg/t1054650.shtml>. Accessed 20th April 2019.

<sup>10</sup> This regulation’s Chinese pinyin is ‘*Zhonghuarenmin Gongheguo Waiyuoren RujingChujing Guanli Tiaoli*’. It was approved on the 3rd of July in 2013 at the Fifteenth Executive Meeting of the State Council and was promulgated on the 1st of September in 2013. Available via the official website of China

foreigners in China. Based on data from the PKULAW database, there have been at least 150 central regulations and judicial interpretations containing *Waiguoren* since 1964.

The use of *Waiguoren* to denote foreigners gained momentum since the 1960s. Political circumstances changed, and ‘nationality’ became more important (see part ‘The disappearance of *Waiqiao* from immigration policy’). The term *Waiguoren* (to mean ‘foreigners’) has therefore featured in many legal texts since then. The change of the reference from *Waiqiao* to *Waiguoren* shows that Chinese immigration policy turned from ethnic oriented to more administration-oriented.

### Cultural and sentimental disengagement of *Waiguoren*

Even though *Waiguoren* is frequently used in the Chinese language system, the political sense of the *Waiguoren* is weakened in oral Chinese. In spoken language, the cultural meaning rather than the political meaning of *Waiguoren* is highlighted. An example of this is the statement of the author Weimin Zhen in his literary work: [...] *we Chinese all think that as long as we have Chinese blood, whenever and wherever we are, even when we join a foreign nationality [read: when we become waiguoren], we cannot change the Chinese appearance of yellow skin and black hair, because our roots are in China, because our ancestors were Chinese from generation to generation* (Zhen 2015, p. 157).

Another example is from the poet Guanglong Di, who wrote about the different feelings and experiences when meeting foreigners on the street: ‘...when I saw foreigners [read: *Waiguoren*] in the street, I would take a few more looks at them, (...), that is because they look so different to me’ (Di 2014, p. 200). Here, *Waiguoren* as a concept obviously corresponds with the concept of ethnic Chinese.

However, the application of *Waiguoren* can result in a cultural and sentimental disengagement of foreigners from China. In many Chinese people’s minds, ‘foreigners’ are different from overseas Chinese. This point of view may actually be much more deeply rooted in the minds of overseas Chinese. They have complained that the use of the term *Waiguoren* to describe them hurts their feelings, as they worked hard for the construction of China even when they were in a foreign country. This alienating term could only drive them further away from their hometown/home country, rather than bring them closer (Kan 1988, p. 163). In some cases, e.g. when taxes are levied on foreigners, they have objected to being charged higher fees than Chinese natives or citizens of Hongkong and Macau (ibid. 1988, p. 163), as they do not regard ‘Chinese-Americans’ as foreigners (ibid. 1988, p. 164).

The other consequence of using *Waiguoren* is that it cannot reflect the integration of immigrants. China’s contemporary immigration policy emphasizes on the management and administration of foreigners, which can largely be derived from its immigration laws of 1985 and 2013. Entry, exit, residence and travel form the main

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Footnote 10 (continued)

Consular Affairs (both the English edition and Chinese edition). <http://cs.mfa.gov.cn/zlbg/ffg/crjxg/t1060665.shtml>. Accessed 25th April 2019.

contents of these laws; while education, welfare, etc. (typical integration subject areas) are missing. With the number of the long-term stay foreigners continually increasing (to about 1 million in 2020 [IOM 2021]), issuing more integration policies becomes a pressing need. In today's Chinese immigration policy, we may thus expect applying a term with less cultural connotation and which can reflect more integration.

## Yimin (migrant)

### The semantic development of *Yimin*

The Chinese for *Migrant* is *Yimin*. Normally, *Yimin* is a noun and indicates either a person or an animal moved from one place to another (according to English dictionaries like Oxford and Collins). In Chinese, when it is a noun, it can only represent a person but not an animal (Luo, 2008, p. 73). What should be noticed is that both in English and Chinese, *Migrant (Yimin)* does not distinguish between internal and international migration.

What is quite different from the word *Migrant* in English is that the Chinese *Yimin* can become a verb, representing the process of moving residents into another place, whether or not inside a country (Luo, 2008, p. 73; Chinese Etymology Dictionary, 1998, p. 2305). *Zhouli*, a book describing Chinese society in the pre-qin period, records: *Ruobang Xionghuang, Zeyi Huangban Zhi Fa Zhizhi, Ling Yimin Tongcai* (Chinese Etymology Dictionary 1998, p. 2305, cited in Chen 2006, p. 82), which means that when there was a famine in the Zhou Dynasty, the government would need to take measures, including transferring [read: migrate, here spelled as 'migrant'] their people to a place with good harvest.

In ancient China, *Migrant* can even mean changing the common aspiration of the people (Luo 2008, p. 73). Chinese ancient militarist Bin Sun in his famous book *Sun Bin's Art of War*, said that *Yongbing Yimin Zhidao, Quanheng Ye* (Luo 2008, p. 73, cited in Long 2015, p. 152). Sun wanted to express the idea that using the force of people in war is like measuring things by weighing (Long 2015, p. 152). However, this meaning of *Migrant* is not applied in modern Chinese anymore; the meanings of the moving process and the person who moves remain (Wang 1996, p. 1548).

Although the use of the word *Yimin* to denominate internal migrants is complex, it is common for Chinese media or officials to use *Yimin* when they describe other country's migrant related issues. For example, in Mao Zedong's letter to Liu Shaoqi about the land reform report, Mao said that 'the United States never had feudalism, and European *migrants* grew capitalist agriculture from the very beginning, so the rural market was particularly vast' (Party Documents Research Office of the CPC Central Committee 1991, p. 31).

But when it comes to foreigners from another country who stay in China, *Migrant* (i.e. the word *Yimin*) has not been a word used to describe this group of people until recently. *Migrant* was mostly used to refer to *internal* migrants in China. This point can be reflected in China's regulations on migrants. In 1986, China's State Council announced its approval of the Shaanxi province's 'report about migrants (*Yimin*)

in the Sanmenxia reservoir area’—*State Council’s Approval on Resettlement of Migrants and Transfer of Workers from State Farm in Sanmenxia Reservoir Area of Shaanxi Province*.<sup>11</sup> Since then, the government has released a series of regulations on how to settle reservoir migration. Among these, *Migrants of the Three Gorges Project* form the key part of China’s migration work. The *Regulations on Resettlement of Migrants in the Construction of the Three Gorges Project of the Yangtze River (2011 revision)*<sup>12</sup> were developed more than 18 years after the release of its first version in 1993. The more general regulation about how to deal with issues raised by the water conservancy construction and its hydroelectric project, including migrant resettlement, has been governed by the State Council since 1991. Up to the present, the *Regulations on Land Expropriation Compensation and Resettlement of Migrants for Large and Medium-sized Water Conservancy and Hydropower Project Construction (2017 version)*<sup>13</sup> have been revised three times. In fact, all the 32 migrant related regulations of the State Council are about internal migrants—i.e. those reservoir migrants (based on the PKULAW database).

Another spectacular population mobility phenomenon in China in the recent three decades is the transfer of farmer workers. The process of China’s industrialization and urbanization resulted in vast numbers of farmer-turned-migrant-workers who alternate between the city and the countryside every year (Zhu 2015, p. 1). Their identity shifts between farmer and worker (ibid. 2015, p. 1). However, even though these farmer workers are regarded as a type of urban–rural migrants by most scholars (Dong 2009, p. 22), their official term of reference by the government is *Nongmingong*, which is not related to *Migrant* at all. The first mention of *Nongmingong* in legal texts is in the *Regulations on the Employment of Contract Workers by Enterprises Owned by the Whole People*<sup>14</sup> of 1991. According to Article 2 of that

<sup>11</sup> This approval’s Chinese pinyin is ‘Guowuyuan Guanyu Shaanxisheng Sanmenxia Kuqu Yimin Anzhi He Guoying Nongchang Zhigong Zhuanchan Wenti De Pifu’. It was released by China’s State Council on 4th of January in 1986, issued number as State Council [1986] No. 3. Available via [http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB\\_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/491b217927ddc2febdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91%20](http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/491b217927ddc2febdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91%20). Accessed 5th May 2019.

<sup>12</sup> This regulation’s Chinese pinyin is ‘Changjiang Sanxia Gongcheng Jianshe Yimin Tiaoli (2011 Xiuding)’. It was released and came into force on the 8th of January in 2011 and its issue number is Decree No. 588 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. Available via [http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB\\_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/30a1e7baffcbb5c7bdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91](http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/30a1e7baffcbb5c7bdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91). Accessed 5th May 2019.

<sup>13</sup> This regulation’s Chinese pinyin is ‘Dazhongxing Shuili Shuidian Gongcheng Jianshe Zhengdi Buchang He Yimin Anzhi Tiaoli (2017 Xiuding)’. It was released on the 14th of April in 2017 and entered into force on the 1st of June in 2017. Its issue number is Decree No. 679 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. Available via [http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB\\_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/4e1ba793e6ad4a12bdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91](http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/4e1ba793e6ad4a12bdfb.html?keyword=%E7%A7%BB%E6%B0%91). Accessed 10th May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> This regulation’s Chinese pinyin is ‘Quanmin Suoyouzhi Qiye Zhaoyong Nongmin Hetongzhi Gongren De Guiding’. It was issued on the 25th of July in 1991 by the State Council. Its issue number is Decree No. 87 of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. It has been annulled and replaced by the *Labor Contract Law of the People’s Republic of China (2007)*. Available via [http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB\\_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/914d4f7b4ce3a4f6bdfb.html?keyword=%E5%85%A8%E6%B0%91%E6%89%80%E6%9C%89%E5%88%B6%E4%BC%81%E4%B8%9A%E6%8B%9B%E7%94%A8%E5%86%9C%E6%B0%91%E5%90%88%E5%90%8C%E5%88%B6%E5%B7%A5%E4%BA%BA%E7%9A%84%E8%A7%84%E5%AE%9A](http://sq.lib.xju.edu.cn/rwt/BDFB_CN/https/P75YPLURNN4XZZLYF3SX85B/chl/914d4f7b4ce3a4f6bdfb.html?keyword=%E5%85%A8%E6%B0%91%E6%89%80%E6%9C%89%E5%88%B6%E4%BC%81%E4%B8%9A%E6%8B%9B%E7%94%A8%E5%86%9C%E6%B0%91%E5%90%88%E5%90%8C%E5%88%B6%E5%B7%A5%E4%BA%BA%E7%9A%84%E8%A7%84%E5%AE%9A). Accessed 10th May 2019.

regulation, *Nongmingong* is the abbreviation of ‘*Nongmin Hetong Zhi Gongren*’, which means ‘contract workers recruited from farmers’. Since then, *Nongmingong* has become the fixed term for those migrant workers in China.

More recently, *Yimin* also indicates ‘international migrants’, as well as persons who live in another country for a certain time. The UN recognizes a foreigner who lives in another country for more than 3 months but less than 1 year as a ‘temporary’ migrant, while one who lives there for more than 1 year can be regarded as a ‘long-term’ or ‘permanent’ migrant (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2019). In China, even though there is no unified stipulation on recognizing a foreigner as a *Yimin*, the time limitation is adopted when conducting demographic statistics. The national survey of long-term residence foreigners, for example, counts all those who have lived in the country for more than 3 months (State Immigration Administration 2011).

Though *Yimin* (Migrant) in China is more commonly used to denote internal migration, we will henceforth show that there are signs that the government is expanding its use to refer to international migrants as well (following the increasing internationalization of China’s society). As the policy towards foreigners changed, so did the terminology.

### **From *Waiguoren* to *Yimin*: turn to integration-oriented immigration policy**

A particular change is noted at the beginning of the new millennium. Until then, China had primarily been an active migrant sending country. While, with the number of foreign citizens who live in China reaching about 1,000,000, China began to have a dual identity, both as a sending and receiving country (IOM 2021). China’s economic and international aspirations necessitated a modernized immigration system, hence laws and agencies were set up to regulate the instream of migrants. Chinese official statements started to prefer the use of the word *Yimin* as a more neutral term for foreigners, emphasizing its host status.

This more neutral narrative was an important sign to the world as China aspired more international cooperation and consequently an improved immigration management system. China had been an observer to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) since 2001. In June 2016, the IOM approved China’s formal membership application, making it its 165th member (IOM 2021). Ambassador Ma Zhaoxu, the then permanent representative of China to the United Nations Office in Geneva claimed that ‘*it is the inevitable choice for China to deeply participate in global governance and deepen international migration cooperation... China is changing from a country of origin to a country of origin, transit and destination. China is willing to strengthen experience exchange and practical cooperation with the International Organization for Migration and other countries in the fields of border management, immigration integration, combating human trafficking, disaster prevention and mitigation, humanitarian relief and so on*’. (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and other International Organizations in Switzerland 2016).

The inauguration of China’s National *Immigration* Administration subsequently followed on 2 April 2018. It was the first time in Chinese history that a particular

national migration bureau was established to manage foreigners. Before, the function of administrating foreigners was quite decentralized and split into different ministries (Pieke 2014).

Noteworthy is that the new bureau integrates both Chinese and foreigners' entry & exit policy. In addition, foreigners' stay and residence, nationality management, and illegal migrants all fall within the auspices of the new bureau. Foreigners, as a group of residents in China, are finally managed under one migration bureau. All the official communication of the National Immigration Administration is now using the term *Yimin* (e.g. see its press releases between January and June in 2021). This kind of overall central management of foreigners is thought to conform to the general trend of the times (Liu 2018). The Chinese government is therefore clearly transmitting a signal of integration orientation in its immigration policy.

### Other forms of reference to foreigners

There are many other Chinese words that have a similar meaning to *Waiyuoren* (foreigners). *Wairen* indicates the outsiders of a vassal state in China's ancient times. It can also, however, represent foreigners in modern times (Luo 2008, p. 1148). When discussing the development of China's newspapers, Gongzhen Ge said that 'Chinese modern newspapers are from *Wairen*' (*Woguo Xiandai Baozhi Zhi Chansheng, Jun chuzi Wairen Zhi Shou*) (Ge 1985, p. 55), which highlights foreigners' important role in the early days of China's newspaper industry.

Another word, *Waiyi* can represent both the foreign country and foreigners (Luo 2008, p. 1148). For example, in order to limit foreign businessmen's activities in Guangzhou, Shiyao Li, the viceroy of Liangguang during the Qing Dynasty, proposed the 'Rules of Being On Guard Against *Waiyi*' (*Fangfan Waiyi Guitiao*) in 1759 (Fang and Jiang 2007, p. 1024). But '*Waiyi*' is actually no longer used in contemporary Chinese, although it was used widely in archaic Chinese.

In fact, *Waiyi* represents a classic perspective of Confucianists. Authors like Liu and Zhao, for instance, refer to *Waiyi* as follows: *Nei Zhuxia Waiyidi*. This statement translates as 'people who are inside the central plains are referred to as the Huaxia ethnic group, those who are at the peripheral areas are tribes or minorities'. As a kind of Chinese national viewpoint, these authors therefore distinguish Han nationality from other nationalities by the standard of Chinese etiquette rather than that of race (Liu 2012, p. 186; Zhao 2012). The viewpoint that emphasized cultural differences rather than racial differences further developed the debate on '*Yi Xia Zhi Bian*'—the difference between minorities and Huaxia ethnic groups. This occurred when ethnic minorities had entered the Central Plains in succession at the end of the Zhou dynasty (Liu 2012, p. 187). However, following the process of Chinese national amalgamation, people, especially sovereigns, preferred to minimize the differences and highlight the integration (Zhao 2012). Thus, concepts like *Tianxia Yiti* (the world as a whole), *Huayi Yiti* (Huaxia ethnic group and minority groups as a whole) etc., advocating the great national unity, became more popular and dominant in successive dynasties (ibid. 2012).

*Waibin* is a polite term referring to ‘foreign friends’ in China. *Waibin* is explained as ‘guests from foreign countries’ (Chinese Etymology Dictionary 1998, p. 652; Luo 2008, p. 1148). In ancient China, feudal princes would treat their foreign guests—*Waibin*—with good wine served in a precious wineglass. This is recorded by the poet Zhen Yuan in the Tang Dynasty as *Guzhe Zhuhou Xiang Waibin, Luming Sanzou Chen Guizan* (Xie 2016, p. 552).

Nowadays, *Waibin* is still used in official texts. It is closely related to the work concerning foreign affairs in China. When receiving foreign guests, civil servants need to pay attention to the corresponding rules: e.g. they need to see off the *Waibin* warmly when *Waibin* finish their visit and are about to leave China (Zhang 2015, p. 215). Actually, there is a clear principle on how to host *Waibin*, namely *Renzhen Fuze, Reqing Jiedai, Xizhi Zhoudao, Neiwai Youbie*, which means that reception personnel should be conscientious and responsible, warm, meticulous and thoughtful, and take into account cultural and ethnic differences when *Waibin* are coming (Changji Yearbook Codification Committee 2015, p. 142).

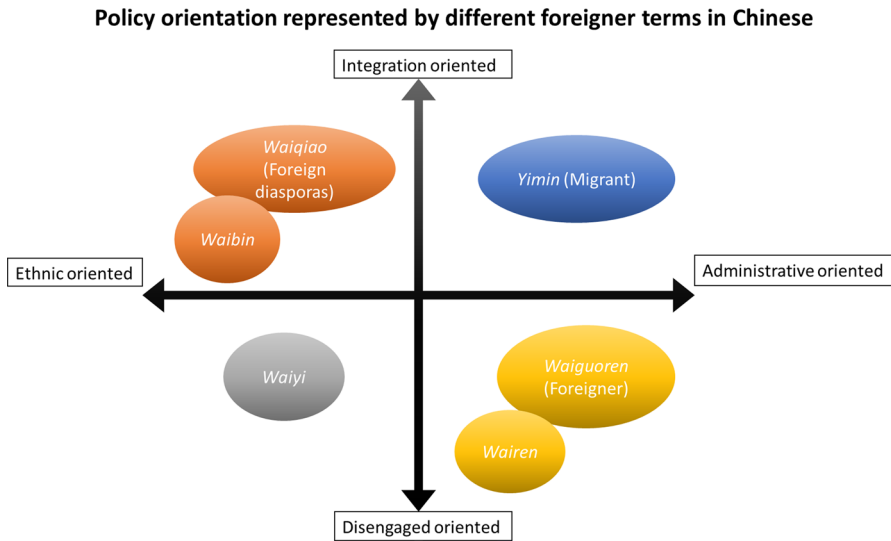
## Political implications of semantics

Noting that the change of terms for ‘foreigner’ go hand in hand with the development of China’s immigration policy, a more thorough analysis of the political connotation of these terms is needed. As the semantics of words are tendentious (see Fig. 1), so are the policies. *Waiqiao*, with its strong ethnic implication, delivers an ethnic oriented policy conception. So when this term is used in China’s official immigration policy documents, it represents a policy formulated from the perspective of ethnics and culture, highlighting the difference between ethnic Chinese and other nationals. However, once the ‘dual nationality’ problem between China and its neighbouring countries was solved, the nationality definition became clear and a word with less ethnic connotation was needed. The change from *Waiqiao* to *Waiyuoren* therefore seems a deliberate political choice to reflect the different attitude towards ‘foreigners’.

*Waiyuoren* has a more political undertone and clearly refers to those ‘outside’ the nation. When it is used in the policy area, it has an administrative connotation. Therefore, when *Waiyuoren* replaced *Waiqiao*, it shows that the decision-makers focus more on the ‘administration’ of foreigners.

*Yimin*, however, gives prominence to the host status of foreigners. It is a term that can show the integration connotation of policies. In the past decades, China has attracted an increasing number of foreigners. With about 1 million long-term immigrants, China is gradually regarded as a migrant receiving country (IOM 2021). The integration of this large group of foreigners thus becomes a prominent issue.

The term *Yimin*, as a more recent phenomenon, is then a more neutral term and considers the process of moving. Although historically used for internal migration only, China has now adopted the word in its international meaning, exemplified by the creation of the National Immigration Administration—a possible sign of China’s willingness to conform to international practices. The recent changes of the terms from *Waiyuoren* to *Yimin* in China’s immigration policy system, means that



**Fig. 1** Policy orientation represented by different foreigner terms in Chinese. *Source* Author's illustration

decision-makers are considering foreigner issues from the perspective of China as a receiving country. It is a deliberate political choice to show that more integration policies may be expected.

## Conclusion

This article has shown a striking parallel between China's immigration policy evolution and the development of the term 'foreigner', from *Waiqiao* to *Waiguoren* and *Yimin*. While the semantics of these three words may suggest that they are synonyms, this paper shows that each of these terms has a unique connotation that has changed in time, alongside the changing policies.

*Waiqiao*, corresponding to the concept of diasporas, has a strong cultural and ethnic meaning and was used especially at the beginning of modern China, reflecting the policies of dealing with ethnic Chinese living abroad. At the end of the 1950s, the word *Waiguoren* replaced *Waiqiao* to describe foreigners in Chinese official texts, since then the policy changed to favour nationality over ethnicity. At that time, a series of policies that dealt with the entry and exit of other nationals saw the light. Over time, *Waiguoren* replaced *Waiqiao* to denote foreigners in most of the applicable cases. In modern Chinese, *Yimin*, as the literal translation of 'Migrant', was historically used to refer to *internal* migrants. Laws and regulations as recent as those of the 1980s refer to this internal migration: reservoir migrants and farmer-turned workers, for example are mostly referred to as *Yimin*. With the establishment of new and more modern migration policies, however, Chinese official texts now also use



*Yimin* to denote foreigners. The term *Yimin* therefore represents a new and more inclusive policy trend.

In brief, the change of the terms of reference for foreign persons in China reflects the evolution of China's perception of foreigners. This is not a linguistic evolution, but an evolution that goes hand in hand with the changing policies of the country, from ethnic isolationist policies (using its own ethnically-oriented words to refer to foreigners) to more integrative international migrant policies (with subsequent other, more neutral words to denote foreigners). As policies towards foreigners changed, so did the words to describe them, embedding them in a different semantic (and therefore cultural) setting. By changing the narrative to describe foreigners, policy makers inadvertently enhanced the impact of their new policies by demonstrating the policy change not only in legal texts but also in language.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-022-00346-3>.

**Acknowledgements** I would like to express my great appreciation to my supervisor Prof. Florian Trauner for his suggestions during the revising period of this research work. I am also extremely grateful to Anthony Antoine's assistance in editing the manuscript.

**Author contributions** LX is expected to have made substantial contributions to the conception; analysis; have drafted the work; have approved the final manuscript and submitted version (and any substantially modified version that involves the author's contribution to the study); and have agreed to be personally accountable for the author's own contributions and to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated, resolved, and the resolution documented in the literature.

**Funding** No funding was received for conducting this study.

**Data availability** Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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