Beijing Airport.
PC: @Pacman321 (CC), on
Flickr.com.

Unfortunate or Convenient?

Contextualising China's Covid-19 Border Restrictions

Tabitha SPEELMAN

China's Covid-19 border control measures have disrupted decades of ever-increasing mobility in and out of China, just at a time of growing uncertainty about China's relations with much of the outside world. As they persist into 2022, fuelling worries about China's increasing isolation, it is useful to take stock and look at these policies more closely. How 'closed' has China been during the pandemic, and how reasonable is it to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term?

The continuation of China's Covid-19 border restrictions into 2021 has attracted an increasing amount of international commentary. Like with Taiwan, New Zealand or Australia, which also largely closed their borders for the past year and a half, there is an understandable focus on the steep human costs of these measures that have separated families and disrupted life trajectories. But in the case of China, this is outweighed by the amount of concern about the possible geopolitical implications, which have coincided with tense diplomatic relations between China and many Western nations.

First, media reports paint an image of a country ‘isolated from the world’, linking the restrictions to ‘a broader inward turn’ (Fay Cortez and Thomson 2021; Rachman 2021). ‘What if China Never Reopens?’ ran the headline of an opinion piece in *The Wire China* (Freymann 2021). Second, the reports suggest that China’s border policies will make global cooperation harder on a broad range of issues. For instance, in July 2021, *The Economist’s* China column, *Chaguan*, noted: ‘Mutual distrust will be hard to overcome until China re-opens’ (The Economist 2021a).

The impact on international mobility of China’s zero Covid-19 approach is perceived as a concern not just because of the size of the country’s immigrant and (especially) emigrant communities. Rather, when it comes to China, the discourse about ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ the borders, which is now used worldwide in the context of virus control, carries added political weight—echoing previous periods when China was less accessible to foreigners and had tense relations with major Western powers. To many foreign observers, the border restrictions are more than a mix of health measures temporarily minimising international mobility to and from China for most Chinese and foreign nationals; rather, they symbolise a wider ‘closing off’ of Chinese society to the outside world that fits with the Chinese leadership’s plans. As one Russian student put it: ‘It feels like they’re trying to get rid of foreigners’ (Billman 2020).

This essay aims to disentangle some of this rhetoric. Rather than assuming a connection between China’s border restrictions and well-documented wider shifts in its political environment—from an increasingly assertive diplomatic approach to the rise of ethnonationalism among parts of the population—I look at these policies more closely. How ‘closed’ has China been during the pandemic, and how reasonable is it to expect that authorities will greatly reduce international mobility in the long term?

Disrupted Mobilities and China’s Zero-Covid Approach

Certainly, the country’s border policy during the pandemic has been restrictive, reversing a previous trend that saw international travel to and from China increasing year-on-year, reaching 670 million border crossings in 2019 (NIA 2020a). The 2010s witnessed a boom in international mobility for Chinese nationals, with the percentage of Chinese passport holders increasing from around 2 per cent of the population in 2010 to nearly 15 per cent, or more than 200 million people, in 2019 (compared with 44 per cent in the United States) (Xinhua 2019; US State Department 2021). At the time of writing in November 2021, for those allowed into the country, the sky-high ticket prices for a seat on one of the 200 permitted international flights a week (just over 2 per cent of the 2019 figure) is only one of several substantial barriers, on top of a 14 to 28-day quarantine on arrival (Reuters 2021). Chinese nationals without access to these resources have de facto been barred from returning home.

Many of the one to two million foreign nationals living in the country have also felt unable to leave because of difficulties they would face re-entering, while foreign residents who were outside China after March 2020 have often not been able to return. How many are affected is unclear: a once-a-decade census conducted in November 2020 counted 1.4 million ‘overseas residents’, including 845,697 foreign nationals and 584,998 residents from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, but estimates based on other official data sources suggest that by the start of the pandemic, the number of immigrants living in China was significantly higher (Xinhua 2021a). The figure includes a large foreign student population—a product of the rapid internationalisation of Chinese higher education—many of whom were on winter holidays at the start of the pandemic and most of whom have not been allowed to return. In 2020, even foreign diplomats were asked to stay away.

This situation is unlikely to change any time soon. As Zhong Nanshan, the respiratory expert and government advisor who has played a key

role in informing the Chinese public during the Covid-19 pandemic, recently said in several interviews, while ‘China cannot go on like this long-term’, its current approach of suppressing outbreaks when they are discovered is considered less costly to society than any version of living with the virus (Zhang 2021; CGTN 2021). It is unlikely the status quo, which has been restrictive but also highly effective in limiting Covid-19 transmission, will see radical change in 2022, when China’s political leadership will focus on organising, first, the Winter Olympics and, then, a party congress in the autumn.

Still, Zhong’s comments, as well as the statements of several other top experts suggesting that China open its borders in the next phase of pandemic management, are significant (see, for instance, Wang 2021). They suggest that officially acceptable debate on China’s zero-Covid containment strategy has broadened since the summer, when a well-known epidemiologist had to back-track after making remarks about coexisting with the virus and members of the public were punished for discussing alternative virus-control strategies (The Economist 2021b). As other countries that have followed zero-Covid strategies are changing their approach, China—by far the largest among them—is also debating when and how to ‘reopen’. International mobility is a prominent part of this discussion, linking China’s border restrictions to a phase in pandemic crisis management that should eventually end.

In the following, I give an overview of how China’s border restrictions developed during the pandemic, highlighting the way Chinese policies changed over time and showing what aspects of international mobility continued or are being resumed, thus adding nuance to discourses about China being ‘closed off’. Then, looking at China’s wider Covid-era immigration management, I explore to what extent the policy discourse on international mobility has shifted, showing that the pandemic has accelerated some policy trends while slowing others. Based on these inquiries, I argue that, as of mid-November 2021, there is little evidence that Chinese authorities view severely reduced international mobility as more than a temporary public health strategy.

From Xenophobia and Border Walls to ‘Normalised’ Pandemic Border Control

When China closed its borders to most foreign visa-holders on 28 March 2020, 44 of 45 confirmed Covid-19 cases that day were among international entries. A spokesperson for the National Immigration Administration (国家移民管理局, NIA) described the new measure as an ‘unfortunate, temporary restriction’ that ‘followed the example of many other countries’ (State Council 2020). Compared with lockdown measures, which it pioneered, China was relatively late in implementing Covid-19 border restrictions. Following the Trump administration’s restrictions on Chinese arrivals in early February 2020, which were among its earliest virus-control measures, Chinese Government representatives were critical of international border restrictions, many of which focused on China. In this period, many foreign nationals had temporarily left the country, with foreign students back home for the winter holiday while others left to avoid the domestic spread of the virus following the outbreak in Wuhan. However, as the spread of the virus reduced in China while increasing worldwide, China, too, turned its focus towards monitoring and quarantining arrivals from a growing list of high-risk countries. Late on 26 March 2020, the central government’s Covid-19 Control Leading Group, led by Premier Li Keqiang, concluded that the pandemic was ‘speeding up’ outside China’s borders and decided to close the border to foreign nationals, except for a select group of permanent residents (Xinhua 2020; MFA 2020a). This closure complemented the existing negative international travel advice for Chinese nationals.

I remember during a transit in Malaysia on 27 March waiting for wi-fi reception to open an online article that would confirm whether the border would close to foreign visa-holders that day—when my partner and I would coincidentally be arriving in Guangzhou—or the next. On arrival, we learnt that quarantine now had to be completed at the port of entry, with transit to one’s city of residence and home quarantine no longer

allowed. The late notice was typical of how policies changed on a daily basis. Reliable information was hard to come by, with news coming out only after Covid-19 press conferences, although exit-entry authorities in cities with large foreign communities like Shanghai stepped up their public services by opening a hotline and publishing multilingual updates. While the Chinese Government had not yet restricted international flights—except for the closure of Wuhan’s international airport and the rerouting of flights to Beijing—air carriers worldwide were cancelling most of their flights and, by late March, it had become extremely difficult to reach the country.

The focus on preventing imported cases marked a new phase in China’s virus containment strategy. Domestic mobility, which had ground to a halt in the first months of the pandemic, was slowly resuming. According to anthropologist Xiang Biao (2020), whereas during the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic of 2003 domestic migrant workers had been the main mobile group in Chinese society (and hence faced the most control measures and stigma), to control the spread of Covid-19, China had to resort to a blanket approach of shutting the entire society—showing just how integral mobility has become to contemporary Chinese life. As the domestic wave was contained, a grid-like surveillance structure at the neighbourhood level, made up of a patchwork of low-level state and societal actors—including resident committees, security guards, and volunteer groups—continued to monitor mobility (Chuang 2021). Things seemed to be under control, but when imported cases started to spread, fear of a second wave was real. As a community grid worker in the Yunnan border town of Ruili put it in an interview:

In January–February, we mostly looked at [mobility within] the province; in February–March it was about people coming to Ruili from Wuhan and surroundings, then in March the focus turned towards foreign nationals entering the border ... strict control of imported cases will be our main focus going forward. (Liu, Y. 2020)

The threat of a second wave imported from abroad resulted in a period of increased xenophobia, right around the time of the border closure. Things came to a head in April 2020 in Guangzhou, where African migrants were singled out for unwarranted quarantine and other forms of discrimination after several Nigerian migrants tested positive (Marsh et al. 2020). Reports of restaurants refusing foreign customers and African migrants evicted by their landlords went viral globally, while in China the events were filtered through a longstanding and disproportional media fascination with the African trader communities in the south of the country. Several cases of foreign nationals in other Chinese cities not respecting virus-control measures, and of localities providing paid-for quarantine facilities, also attracted public anger (Lu and Li 2020; Sina.com 2020).

The public scrutiny of foreign migrants as potential virus carriers, which had been observed worldwide during the early phases of the pandemic, occurred in China shortly after what perhaps was the largest public debate on immigration to date. In February 2020, judicial authorities released for public comment a draft law expanding permanent residency rights for foreign nationals (MOJ 2020). A heated, largely negative public response followed, running to the billions of online comments, many of which focused on the perceived privileging of foreign migrants by state authorities. At the time, immigrants were not yet considered a health risk, but experts widely questioned the timing of the law’s release during an unprecedented nationwide lockdown that likely intensified emotions (see, for instance, Liang 2020).

While state authorities were evasive and slow in their response to events in Guangzhou—and to discrimination against foreign nationals in this period more broadly—the concerns of the Chinese public around imported cases were addressed more directly. The Chinese Government emphasised that most new cases were now imported rather than domestic, but it was also relatively transparent in providing information on each imported case, making it clear that 90 per cent of these were Chinese nationals (Teng 2020). A *People’s Daily* op-ed on 23 March 2020 stated that such authoritative information should calm

residents and instil confidence among the public that the pandemic could be overcome (Shi 2020). Rumours about a case in Xinjiang coming from abroad and of large numbers of Koreans coming to China seeking safety from the pandemic were dispelled by government spokespeople (The Paper 2020; Liu, H. 2020). At the same time, authorities stressed that foreign nationals in China must abide by local virus-control laws (MFA 2020b). In April, a summary of excerpts from Chinese laws pertaining to epidemic and immigration control was assembled and spread through state media channels in seven languages (NIA 2020b).

As awareness among the Chinese public of the closed borders increased, xenophobia reduced. Still, like Hubei residents, international returnees—foreign or Chinese—often faced some stigma, and foreign nationals could still cause more apprehension than before the pandemic, especially outside large cities. In May 2020, the Guangdong Provincial Government released China's first regulations combating immigrant discrimination (Elmer 2020). While this was a significant contribution to China's immigration legal framework, the main purpose of the regulations was arguably symbolic—that is, to appease diplomatic tensions with several African nations following the events in Guangzhou. More generally, foreigners who stayed in China during the pandemic were celebrated in the state media, which cited their contributions to—and praise of—Chinese Covid-19 control.

After the border closure, foreign nationals remaining in or wanting to enter China faced significant uncertainty. While a two-month automatic visa or residence permit extension was available to most foreigners, this and other similar measures were hardly publicised. In cities with large foreign populations like Shanghai, options for changing a visa without leaving the country were expanded.

A system emerged for applying for exemptions to the border restrictions on foreign nationals, requiring in many cases an invitation letter from a local foreign affairs office. These letters were issued in an unpredictable fashion, with large companies with good government connections the most likely to get their foreign employees into the country. Family dependants, and groups such as

foreign teachers and self-employed workers, were less likely to be approved, especially in the first half of 2020. Relaxations announced in September 2020 allowing those who had valid work or family visas or residence permits in March 2020 to return were only partially implemented when a new wave of Covid-19 cases hit many countries in the autumn (Wee and Bradsher 2021).

Perhaps the most significant exception was made for professionals and students from South Korea—the top country of origin for immigrants to China—who faced a relatively relaxed return policy under a bilateral agreement in effect from May 2020. South Korean students were able to return to China starting from August 2020. Generally, however, foreign students wishing to return to China to continue their studies were excluded from this economy-oriented invitation scheme. In 2021, these measures did not significantly change, although it became somewhat easier for those with valid residence permits to leave and re-enter China, and some embassies started issuing more new visas on a case-by-case basis.

As authorities declared China's Covid-19 control measures 'normalised', the space for providing some immigration services grew (Gov.cn 2021). But the focus of the Chinese authorities was to further limit the occurrence of imported cases among the remaining international arrivals. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) played an important role in this, implementing a system in June 2020 that strictly limited the number of permitted flights and penalised airline companies for positive cases above a certain threshold on a flight by cancelling that flight connection for several weeks (CAAC 2020).

The NIA and public security authorities also strengthened control over China's 22,000 kilometres of land borders, which before the pandemic accommodated about one-third of all China's cross-border traffic, much of it over informal backroads. To curb this mobility, measures ranged from civil border patrol teams and increased monetary rewards for reporting irregular border crossings to building up border infrastructure, including electrified fencing and camera surveillance. Perhaps most heavily hit by these measures was Ruili, on Yunnan's border with Myanmar, which saw four

Covid-19 waves and extended periods of lockdown. Border residents in southwest China, especially those living in villages, have been banned from engaging in their usual cross-border activities and still face domestic mobility restrictions.

From December 2020, the NIA directed a large campaign targeting cross-border criminal activities, aimed mostly at Chinese nationals engaged in gambling and otherwise living under the radar in Southeast Asian countries. In July 2021, the NIA reported 17,285 arrests under the campaign in the first half of the year—more than double the number of the previous year (Bianhai News 2021). In the same period, it had apprehended more than 31,000 irregular foreign nationals and 85,000 irregular border-crossers (NIA 2021). For all this effort, as elsewhere, these physical border barriers are never watertight—*Radio Free Asia* recently reported on border residents cutting holes in the fence in the Guangxi Autonomous Region—leading to some small Covid outbreaks (Long and Chingman 2021).

In 2021, mobility somewhat increased, with the NIA recording almost 67 million border crossings in the first half of the year—10 per cent of the 2019 figure. In that period, it renewed the residence permits of 370,000 foreign nationals (NIA 2021). In the autumn of 2021, many Chinese students resumed or started their studies abroad, although authorities continue to restrict passport services for Chinese nationals without clear study or work-related reasons to travel—a measure that has been in place since the start of the pandemic. Among foreign nationals who meet the requirements, the border closures have led to increased interest in Chinese permanent residency, which in cities like Beijing and Shanghai has become more accessible in recent years for high-income professionals and those with Chinese relatives. Still, after 18 months of strict border restrictions, many foreign nationals in China report suffering ‘cabin fever’, have left, or are reconsidering their plans to stay in the country (see, for instance, White et al. 2021b).

Change and Continuity in China’s Covid-19-Era International Mobility Management

The timeline and details of China’s border restrictions show how these measures were shaped by the country’s evolving public health response. As for other aspects of China’s Covid-19 strategy, measures limiting international mobility started relatively late and, following a phase of haphazard, varied implementation, evolved into a well-oiled machine. As preventing undetected Covid-19 cases from entering the country became a national priority, the implementation of border restrictions followed a campaign-style logic that is familiar in the Chinese political context. The measures were made more restrictive by China’s risk-averse decision-making and policy implementation in crises, when state actors rally around the number-one goal at the expense of other concerns. Appeasing especially domestic public concerns was another priority in that crisis context. At the same time, the timeline shows just how similar some of the Chinese responses were to those adopted elsewhere, especially in countries pursuing zero Covid-19 strategies—from the xenophobia to a diaspora that found themselves locked out, with only the well-off having a chance at getting back in.

Another context for China’s Covid-19 border restrictions is its underdeveloped immigration system. In the reform era, China’s approach to international mobility, and especially immigration, has been cautious and pragmatic. As a politically sensitive policy area, the legal immigration framework has experienced minimal reform—resulting, for instance, in very limited pathways towards permanent immigration status. At the same time, for decades, enforcement of the existing restrictive laws has often been lenient, resulting in large-scale de facto immigrant settlement. Overall, the focus of the notoriously fragmented and opaque bureaucracy managing international mobility has been on aiding China’s economic development and internationalisation.

By comparison, as a relatively marginal policy issue, the securitisation of immigration—for instance, through state discourse presenting immigration as a threat or the designation of significant resources for border security and detecting irregular migration—has been limited (Chou et al. 2016). There have been exceptions to this in the past decade—most notably, the criminalisation of the international mobility of Uyghurs and the marginalisation of African traders in southern China. In recent years, both development and security agendas have seen some change. The NIA, China's first national-level immigration agency—which was made responsible for both ingoing and outgoing mobility as part of the 2018 government reforms—has an expanded mandate for building a more comprehensive immigration system for the foreign nationals China wants to attract, while also expanding its immigration control capacity (Speelman 2020b).

This context can explain some of the idiosyncrasies of the pandemic border restrictions, such as the privileging of returning foreign professionals over foreign students, which can be traced to China's development-oriented immigration bureaucracy. If more of China's long-term foreign migrants were permanent residents, they would have been able to enter under China's pandemic restrictions in conditions similar to those in many other countries in lockdown, as this group has been exempted from border restrictions. It is also unsurprising that remaining outbreaks were concentrated at China's southwestern border, where intensive cross-border cooperation has been the norm and investment in border infrastructure has not been a priority.

So, how are the events of the past two years affecting wider state priorities on international mobility? While the crisis logic remains in place at the border, it is striking that state actors' rhetoric on different types of international mobility has remained largely consistent with pre-pandemic trends and, in some cases, has even gained steam over the course of the pandemic. This is the case for return migration—a policy area in which the current border restrictions form an especially stark contrast with Xi-era discourse on strengthening diaspora engagement and encouraging return migration. Despite the ongoing restrictions, local

authorities, especially in areas with large emigrant populations, have resumed expanding services for returning migrants and are planning for their increased return (see, for instance, Zhou 2021). Talent attraction programs continue and, while the growth rate of emigration for study to some countries seems to have peaked pre-pandemic, researchers note that demand will not just disappear (Ma 2021).

For incoming migration, foreign students, while largely unable to return to China despite significant grassroots organisation, saw themselves welcomed by President Xi Jinping himself in a June 2021 letter (Xinhua 2021b). The NIA's plans to expand access to permanent residency for some groups and allow recent foreign graduates to stay in China to work or start businesses have been implemented at the city level, although the national proposed permanent residency law has been delayed due to the public backlash. During the pandemic, 'immigration service centres' (移民事务服务中心) offering a range of government services in areas with high concentrations of foreigners—part of an NIA-led social integration effort—have continued to be rolled out. At the recent opening of such a centre in Jinhua, Zhejiang Province, a responsible official noted: 'You can't only emphasise foreigner management. You also have to create a feeling of belonging for them in Jinhua, and for that you have to provide good service' (Zhang et al. 2021). Government planning for the period of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan continues to count on growth in areas ranging from talent attraction to inbound tourism. The area of 'immigration services' has also continued to see international cooperation. In late 2020, the NIA participated in several events organised by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on topics related to immigration legal reform and services provision, as part of a program sponsored by the European Union.

When it comes to security measures, such as the efforts to stem irregular migration and tightened border management, the pandemic sped up trends. As enforcing zero Covid-19 along China's long land border became a national priority, state discourse on border security, emphasising China's control over its borders, has greatly intensified. Resources were made available for an expansion of border

infrastructure and for a sustained crackdown on irregular migration. These trends have been further codified in the new Land Borders Law, which includes articles on border-blocking infrastructure and irregular migration. The law, under discussion since 2014, was released for public comment in August 2021 and then adopted by the National People's Congress Standing Committee in October 2021 (Xinhua 2021c). Significantly, however, the restrictions on international mobility have not been part of this politicised state discourse.

As for public anti-immigration sentiment, which has continued to feature in media reports of the Covid-19-era border restrictions, there is little evidence of a sustained increase as a result of the pandemic. While there has been no polling on the issue, domestic debates on China's Covid-19 control suggest the Chinese public has so far largely approved of the border restrictions. However, this should not be taken to equal broad support for reduced immigration (or emigration for that matter). During my research on public attitudes towards immigration, completed in the summer of 2020, I found that individuals clearly differentiated between the temporary situation during the pandemic, which had, as many of my interviewees noted, reduced the numbers of foreigners in their surroundings, and their—diverse—views on immigration policy more broadly. A nationwide online survey I carried out as part of a team at East China University of Science and Technology found results in line with previous studies showing that attitudes towards immigration grew more critical in the past five years compared with the previous decade. But moderate attitudes continued to dominate, and no major pandemic effect could be detected (Speelman 2020a).

That does not mean that these events will have no impact on Chinese public debate about international mobility. The large amount of media attention the crisis brought to immigration could contribute to its further politicisation once controversy strikes again. The events also confirmed that both foreign immigrants and Chinese returnees from abroad have caught the attention of a very active ethnonationalist constituency that increasingly dominates Chinese online discourse. While the xenophobia and extreme nationalism of this

group should not be taken as representative of the wider Chinese population, some of the questions they promote resonate among a broader part of the Chinese public. We found this is especially the case for issues related to any type of foreign or transnational privilege. This will likely be a key issue of concern in Chinese immigration debates as part of a wider shift in Chinese perceptions of the rest of the world during a new phase of its development.

But the crisis also got many people thinking about China's immigration policy—a topic on which public information is limited and public knowledge levels are low. Both the Permanent Residency Law proposal and the escalation of discrimination against African migrants in Guangzhou in April 2020 led to wide-ranging public debate on immigration that went far beyond online racist comments. The degree of public interest, coming at a time of crisis, in both cases also led to a swift state response, suggesting that state perceptions of public opinion on international mobility are becoming a significant policy factor.

During the pandemic, with the Chinese leadership making regular statements directing policy on border security, international mobility governance has been unusually top-down. However, rather than assuming any centralisation the crisis brought about is an unstoppable trend, it is important to keep in mind the large number of actors and the diversity of interests regarding international mobility within Chinese state and society. While the NIA is supposed to be a coordinator of state management of incoming and outgoing mobility, this policy field continues to be very fragmented, with many actors adhering (at least rhetorically) to pre-pandemic international mobility priorities. Public opinion, which is now starting to push for more freedom to travel, is also a factor. Awareness of these dynamics can help make sense of the regional variation and bureaucratic discretion in the implementation of border restrictions in the past two years, while also showing that what happens next is far from inevitable but will be the result of various kinds of negotiations.

Meanwhile, much of the response to the restrictions of course lies beyond the control of the Chinese authorities. From members of the diaspora expressing alienation to the significant repu-

tational damage worldwide among migrants who were looking to China for educational and professional opportunities, the impact of the measures seems deep (see, for instance, Ren 2021). But from a state perspective, there is little evidence the authorities want an overhaul of their policy priorities on international mobility. Rather, in line with international experience, security-related agendas are empowered in the current crisis environment, while more ambitious developmentally motivated reforms are slowed, but not necessarily abandoned.

China's Borders and the Trust Crisis

As international mobility to and from China continues to be severely disrupted by Covid-19 border control measures, it is useful to take stock. The measures have disrupted decades of ever-increasing mobility in and out of China, just at a time of growing uncertainty about China's relations with much of the outside world. Still, even as the long-term impact of these measures remains unclear, it is important to keep in mind that, as analyst Yu Jie recently put it, 'turning inward is not a wholesale package' (White et al. 2021a).

As this essay has shown, China's pandemic border restrictions are also no package deal. Instead, they have changed and continue to change in piecemeal fashion, reflecting slow movements in bureaucratic and diplomatic negotiations, as well as evolving pandemic risk assessment. From the fast-track for US business travellers China announced at the November 2021 Xi–Biden digital summit to unconfirmed indications that more foreign students might be able to return in 2022, this is likely the way in which reforms will unfold in the immediate future.

Fully reopening China's borders would be a big deal for the country's Covid-19 approach. Keeping imported cases low is the impressive result of an all-government effort and a key aspect of China's zero Covid-19 strategy. Any 'living with the virus' strategy would require a radical rethinking of virus management for a nation that, beyond the initial outbreak in Hubei Province, has hardly had to deal

with pandemic issues still plaguing other countries with similar high vaccination rates—from vaccine escape and overflowing hospitals to long Covid.

Given the major health implications of such a policy change, it seems farfetched to see China's border restrictions as primarily or increasingly political as they persist into 2022. Of course, they do not help an already deteriorating environment for international exchange, in which Covid-19 control more broadly has been highly politicised both in and outside China, with Chinese nationalists arguing China cannot abandon its successful 'national model' for virus control. But the public health rationale for the measures remains strong while the intense border restrictions do not fit with much of China's agenda for international mobility and, so far, do not look like a new immigration policy in disguise. Notably, Chinese authorities have not linked the border restrictions to wider political tensions with Western countries—something they could easily have done.

Certainly, issues like declining trust between Chinese and foreign partners are important. Placing the border restrictions within the context of wider political trends is understandable, but also reveals outdated frames of reference. Crucially, it suggests that 'China' can (and wants to) isolate itself from the rest of the world and even physically close itself off, rather than being a large and complex society that is shaping and shaped by global trends.

If this is the view, it is unlikely that relations will restore themselves when a visit to Beijing is once again possible. Instead, one might look at what is still happening and what is possible, even now, in terms of transnational interactions. Think of the more than 800,000 foreign nationals currently in China, and the vast number of Chinese nationals around the world—many of whom have travelled home during the pandemic despite all the obstacles, or who have just arrived from there to study or work abroad. Think of communication technologies making long-distance interaction easier than ever, for public events or—when that is more restricted—at least small-scale communication.

Political trends, such as the Chinese Communist Party's increasing focus on reducing ideological influence from overseas, tighter control over

academic research, and the deterrence effect of the detention of foreign citizens as part of geopolitical disputes—most notably, the two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor—could also reduce some forms of mobility for years to come. In a poll of China researchers earlier this year, 40 per cent said they do not plan to travel to China once restrictions are lifted (Jakes 2021). However, such highly unfortunate trends should not be conflated with the pandemic border restrictions.

During the pandemic, long-term trends in rebalancing power relations between China and other parts of the world have been on full display. The Chinese state is focused on building state capacity for its purposes, while Chinese society is becoming less oriented—and sometimes more hostile—towards the West. Chinese demand, both domestic and from Chinese nationals abroad, will form the greatest impetus to reopen its borders—not that of foreign migrants or visitors. International visitors, especially those from the select group of Western countries that could previously count on low barriers, will have to readjust, while, as elsewhere, migrants can get painfully stuck between systems. At the same time, however, even the past few years remind us to what extent international mobility is an integral part of China's development. That will not just go away. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 6, Issue 3, 2021*, edited by Ivan Franceschini, Nicholas Loubere and Shui-yin Sharon Yam, published 2022 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.06.03.2021.02