

From Cold War Refugees to Economic Immigrants: An Investigation into The Root Cause of the
Underrepresented Chinese Refugees

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Introduction

In the first nine months of 2023, the U.S. Border Patrol made a startling 22,187 arrests of Chinese nationals entering the country through the U.S.'s southern border with Mexico.¹ Besides Latin Americans, people from the other side of the world enter the United States through the southern border. The previous figure stems from people traveling from much further south than Mexico. Over 15,500 Chinese migrants were counted in Panama after traversing a dangerous stretch of jungle beginning in Colombia known as the Darién Gap.² Chinese people were the fourth most common nationality, after Venezuelans, Ecuadorians, and Haitians, crossing the Darién Gap this year.³ The popularity of this route has increased exponentially for Chinese nationals. The popular route to the U.S. is through Ecuador, which has no visa requirements for Chinese nationals.⁴ Migrants from China join Latin Americans there to trek north through the once-impenetrable Darién and across several Central American countries before reaching the U.S. border.⁵ Among the illegal Chinese migrants interviewed by the Associated Press, some left due to bleak economic prospects and others due to the increasingly repressive political climate.⁶ However, all face the same fate if they return—persecution.

Despite these daunting travels and the apparent dangers that compel these migrations, the narrative in U.S. media and policy often categorizes these individuals merely as “migrants” rather than “refugees.” This misclassification is not just a matter of semantics but a reflection of a longstanding bias in the U.S. narrative towards Chinese immigrants, traditionally seen as economic migrants rather than individuals fleeing persecution. This

¹ Elliot Spagat and Didi Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.” Associated Press, October 30, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/chinese-emigration-us-mexico-border-darien-381c215ff30f0f2349c2ea118aa280c6>.

² Spagat and Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.”

³ Spagat and Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.”

⁴ Spagat and Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.”

⁵ Spagat and Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.”

⁶ Spagat and Tang, “As economy falters, more Chinese migrants take a perilous journey to the US border to seek asylum.”

introduction sets the stage for a critical examination of why Chinese asylum seekers, who fit the definition of refugees under international law, remain underrepresented and unrecognized in their legitimate status due to prevailing narratives and biases in U.S. immigration discourse.

Continuing from the contemporary narrative on Chinese migrants in the U.S., it is critical to understand the nuanced circumstances that shaped the experiences of the first Chinese refugees in the U.S. during the Cold War era to see how the narrative on Chinese transformed from refugees to migrants.

After the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, the legislative landscape shifted with the enactment of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. This pivotal legislation permitted Chinese nationals already in the U.S. to adjust their status to permanent residents if they were “worthy applicants.”⁷ This legal adjustment was necessitated by the Chinese Civil War. The Communist victory has made many Chinese nationals in the U.S. stateless and made it impossible for many Chinese nationals to return safely, particularly students and intellectuals who had come to the U.S. to study⁸. As these individuals found themselves unable to return home amidst the burgeoning conflict, U.S. policy adapted to accommodate their extended stay, transforming them from temporary visitors into refugees.⁹ During the Cold War, the U.S. facilitated the entry of Chinese intellectuals and refugees under special legislation, recognizing them as allies against Communist expansion.¹⁰ This era, detailed by Madeline Y. Hsu in her article “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966”, saw the U.S. using immigration policy as a strategic tool to foster ideological allies, starkly contrasting today’s prevailing narrative.¹¹ Hsu highlights that approximately thirty-two thousand Chinese gained entry or permanent residency in the U.S. through refugee legislation

⁷ Madeline Y. Hsu, “The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955,” in *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 104.

⁸ Hsu, “The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955,” 105.

⁹ Madeline Y. Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 31, no. 4 (2012): 13

¹⁰ Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 13.

¹¹ Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 13.

and procedures between 1948 and 1966, reflecting a period when the U.S. actively integrated educated and skilled Chinese nationals to counteract Communist influence.¹²

This strategic acceptance of Chinese refugees during the Cold War, however, contrasts sharply with the recent and current portrayal of Chinese migrants. Despite similar drives—escaping persecution and seeking safety—the narrative has shifted significantly. Today, Chinese individuals arriving at U.S. borders as asylum seekers are more likely to be depicted as economic migrants rather than as refugees in the media, a categorization that downplays their legitimate claims for asylum and protection. This shift in narrative, from welcomed Cold War allies and refugees escaping communism to contemporary economic migrants, underscores a broader transformation in immigration policy and public perception, which increasingly detaches the term “refugee” from Chinese immigrants.

In examining the underrepresentation of Chinese refugees within the broader discourse on Asian refugees, this essay argues that several factors contribute to their detachment from the typical refugee image. Firstly, the implicit transition from visitor to refugee status often obscures their plight, complicating their recognition. Secondly, the special support from the U.S. government, driven by geopolitical rather than humanitarian needs, distances their experiences from those of other refugees. Thirdly, modern Chinese refugees often share narratives similar to illegal Chinese immigrants applying for asylum to immigrate, not to seek refuge, which blurs the distinction between the two groups. Lastly, the socioeconomic advantages and relatively high social status of many Chinese refugees set them apart from typical refugee narratives focused on economic desperation. These factors not only differentiate Chinese refugees from their Asian counterparts but also contribute to their underrepresentation in refugee discussions, challenging conventional stereotypes of what defines a refugee.

The Civil War and Cold War Chinese Refugees

¹² Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 12.

The origination and experiences of the first patch of underrepresented Chinese refugees in the U.S. differed from the common perception of refugees. Unlike refugees who fled to the U.S. due to war and persecution, the first wave of Chinese refugees were mostly student visitors who were already in the U.S. but became refugees due to the Chinese Civil War and the victory of Chinese Communists.¹³

There was a long period of collaboration through educational exchange between China and the U.S., even before the abandonment of the Chinese Exclusion Act.¹⁴ While the Chinese Exclusion Act excluded the working-class Chinese, the U.S.'s intention to extend foreign influence and advance Chinese modernity promoted international educational exchanges of Chinese.¹⁵ It allowed Chinese students to study in the U.S. during the exclusion era. The famous Madam Chuang Kai-shek attended Wellesley College during the Exclusion Era, and Meng Chi, the founder of China Institute in America and the first Chinese student to attend Davidson College in 1919, were all examples of exchange students during the Exclusion Era.¹⁶ This collaboration and exchange continued until the end of the Chinese Civil War. However, these educational exchanges were all under the partnership between the U.S. government and the Chinese Nationalist government, which became the root cause for the first wave of Chinese refugees in the United States.¹⁷

The situation many Chinese experienced in the U.S. during the Chinese Civil War can be illustrated through the example of C.Y. Lee, one of the thousands of Chinese who arrived in the United States during World War II.¹⁸ Lee had arrived in the U.S. to study literature at Columbia University.¹⁹ When he received his degree in 1947, the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) prevented his return to China, and he had no choice but to overstay his student visa and

¹³ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 105.

¹⁴ Madeline Y. Hsu, "Chinese and American Collaborations through Educational Exchange during the Era of Exclusion, 1872-1955," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 31, no. 4 (2012): 314.

¹⁵ Hsu, "Chinese and American Collaborations through Educational Exchange during the Era of Exclusion, 1872-1955," 314.

¹⁶ Hsu, "Chinese and American Collaborations through Educational Exchange during the Era of Exclusion, 1872-1955," 315.

¹⁷ Hsu, "Chinese and American Collaborations through Educational Exchange during the Era of Exclusion, 1872-1955," 315.

¹⁸ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 105.

¹⁹ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 104.

work illegally.²⁰ Lee and most other Chinese in the United States were tied with the Chinese Nationalist government and were considered citizens of the Republic of China under the Chinese Nationalist government. The victory of the Chinese communist party and the change in government made Lee and other Chinese in the United States stateless since they were not citizens under the Chinese Communist Government. Although the Nationalists had relocated its government to Taiwan after the Civil War, most of these Chinese students in the U.S. were from the mainland, where the communist government gained control.²¹ These students' lack of previous connection with this undeveloped frontier island gave them no incentive to return to the Nationalist government. In this bipolar circumstance resulting from the Chinese Civil War, thousands of Chinese in the United States fell between the cracks of these two unacceptable choices for "home."²² Lee and other Chinese students had planned to return to China after their studies, but the war had transformed them into stateless refugees remaining under tenuous legal terms in America, with limited legal rights of residency or employment under existing immigration laws.²³ The narrative of Chinese refugees stands distinct from the conventional understanding of refugees, as escape from their homeland did not precipitate their displacement. Instead, the tumult of the Chinese Civil War thrust them into a state of refugee status without the physical act of fleeing their country. This unique origination of Chinese refugees has contributed to the perception of Chinese refugees as immigrants rather than refugees in the conventional sense.

The first wave of Chinese refugees was at the brink of defining who refugees were. According to UNHCR, "Refugees are people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. They are unable to return to their own country because of feared persecution as a result of who they are, what they believe in or say, or because of armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder."²⁴ While these individuals were escaping a

²⁰ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 104.

²¹ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 106.

²² Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 105.

²³ Hsu, "The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955," 107.

²⁴ "What is a Refugee?" *USA for UNHCR*, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>.

backdrop of aggression and violence, their primary intention was to pursue education, not necessarily to seek safety. They chose to go to the U.S. rather than being “forced to.” However, they were unable to return to China due to the “armed conflict” and “violence”—specifically, the Chinese Civil War that started almost immediately after China and its allies defeated Japan. Notably, the whole transition—the defeat of Japan followed by the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese Civil War—occurred while these Chinese students were in the United States, altering their status to that of refugees, albeit without the typical process of fleeing and seeking asylum. This absence of a conventional refugee journey did not visibly signal to Western observers that these Chinese students and officials were, in fact, refugees. Such a transition did not include the typical imagery of fleeing persecution or arriving en masse seeking asylum, which often typifies refugee movements. The implicit shift from students, trainees, and officials to refugees created ambiguity around their status, contributing to their underrepresentation and the general lack of recognition of their plight as refugees. This case illustrates how the context and visibility of migration can profoundly influence the recognition and understanding of refugee statuses.

Besides Chinese students, the result of the Chinese Civil War also turned Chinese diplomats, visitors, and technicians into refugees.²⁵ This transformation in their status coincided with the escalating Cold War tensions, prompting the U.S. to adjust its immigration policies strategically.²⁶ The objective was twofold: to support these Chinese nationals in the U.S. and to counteract the spread of communist influences. These individuals were not ordinary refugees; they were elite intellectuals meticulously selected by the Nationalist government for their skills.²⁷ These skills made them highly valuable, and there was a significant concern that if these individuals were to fall into Communist China’s hands, it would represent a considerable intellectual and strategic loss to the West.

²⁵ Hsu, “The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955,” 105.

²⁶ Hsu, “The Wartime Transformation of Student Visitors into Refugee Citizens, 1943-1955,” 122.

²⁷ Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 13.

Recognizing their potential, Congress “allocated a total of about ten million dollars” to help the Chinese intellectuals complete their studies, many obtaining doctoral degrees.²⁸ The funding was not merely an educational grant but a strategic move to integrate these highly skilled individuals into American society. By further transitioning them into white-collar or professional roles, the U.S. not only bolstered its intellectual and professional landscape but also ensured that these individuals would become integral, contributing members of society, thereby enhancing their loyalty and alignment with American values over those of Communist China.²⁹ The unique support provided by the U.S. to this select group of Chinese refugees—highly skilled intellectuals—shaped their portrayal within Asian American discourse. Financial and policy-driven assistance for advanced education and professional integration set them apart from typical refugee narratives, which often emphasize struggle and marginalization.

This portrayal, while positive, had the unintended consequence of making these individuals “disappear” from the conventional Asian American discourse. Their success stories diverged sharply from the experiences of other Asian immigrants and refugees who may not have received similar levels of support or who faced significant socioeconomic challenges upon arrival. This divergence contributed to a lack of visibility and recognition of their actual refugee status and struggles, as their experiences did not fit the typical refugee narrative of hardship but highlighted achievement and contribution.

This initial portrayal of Chinese refugees also contributed to the stereotype of Chinese refugees as economic immigrants and model minorities instead of refugees. This stereotype simplifies the diverse experiences of Chinese refugees. It envelops the experience of the Chinese refugees who came to the U.S. later to escape communist persecution and experienced much more challenging circumstances. This stereotype can obscure the systemic barriers and discrimination faced by other members of the community who have not received

²⁸ Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 13.

²⁹ Hsu, “The Disappearance of America’s Cold War Chinese Refugees, 1948-1966,” 13.

the same amount of support. Therefore, the specific aid given to these Chinese refugees not only influenced their trajectories but also shaped broader perceptions and policies towards Chinese refugees in ways that did not fully represent the community's varied realities.

The Second Wave: Chinese Student Protection Act of the 1980s-1990s

The subsequent significant wave of Chinese refugees in the United States emerged towards the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, following the earlier groups who fled during the Cold War and the Chinese Civil War. Although the Great Chinese Famine and the Cultural Revolution, spanning from the 1960s to the late 1970s, also generated a substantial number of refugees. However, these individuals primarily sought refuge in the British colony of Hong Kong, which was much closer to mainland China than the United States and will not be covered in this research.³⁰

This wave of Chinese refugees that arrived in the 1980s and 1990s shared a notable similarity with the earlier refugees from the 1940s—they were predominantly students. Following China's Reform and Opening Up policy initiated in 1978, there was a surge in educational exchange agreements between the U.S. and China.³¹ This led to increasing Chinese students in the United States throughout the 1980s. By the end of the decade, there were approximately 28,000 Chinese students in the U.S., most were initially there as exchange students or later employed and their status transitioned to immigrants after graduation.³²

However, the situation dramatically shifted following the violent suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Many of these students, having supported the pro-democracy demonstrations, faced potential persecution and imprisonment if they returned to China.³³ In response, President Bush and Congress enacted the Chinese Student Protection

³⁰ "Million Refugees From China Crowd Housing in Hong Kong," New York Times, May 3, 1964, https://www.nytimes.com/1964/05/03/archives/million-refugees-from-china-crowd-housing-in-hong-kong.html?unlocked_article_code=1.qE0.XQuh.wh0cTpjvrag2&smid=url-share.

³¹ Eric Fish, "End of an era? A history of Chinese students in America," *The China Project*, published May 12, 2020.

³² Eric Fish, "End of an era? A history of Chinese students in America," *The China Project*, published May 12, 2020, <https://thechinaproject.com/2020/05/12/end-of-an-era-a-history-of-chinese-students-in-america/>.

³³ Brandt Allen Himler, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992," *Willamette Bulletin of International Law and Policy* 1, no. 1 (1993): 110.

Act (CSPA), which allowed these students to stay in the U.S. regardless of their visa status and provided them an opportunity to apply for permanent residency.³⁴ Within the first month after the law's enactment, the Office of Immigration and Naturalization Service received more than 50,000 applications.³⁵ Among these, many applied for asylum, arguing that returning to China would subject them to political persecution due to their anti-government democratic activities.³⁶

While many Chinese students applied for asylum, citing persecution upon potential return, not all gained permanent residency through asylum applications. Other Chinese students obtained permanent residency through immigration and employment channels.³⁷ This prevalence of Chinese immigrants over Chinese refugees who became permanent residents tended to obscure the refugee experiences. Consequently, the image of Chinese refugees often blended into the broader narrative of Chinese immigrants. This conflation contributed to the underrepresentation of Chinese refugees, as their distinct experiences of fleeing persecution became overshadowed by the larger immigrant success narrative. Similar to the wave of Chinese refugees during the 1950s, this wave of Chinese refugees turned from students into refugees without actually fleeing from China—they arrived before the Tiananmen movement for study but became refugees due to the danger they might face upon return. This phenomenon underscores a critical aspect of immigrant and refugee discourse, highlighting how varying paths to residency can impact the visibility and representation of specific groups—the Chinese refugees instead of immigrants—within the broader diaspora.

The 21st-century Chinese refugees in the U.S.

Several Chinese refugees have fled to the U.S. throughout the late 20th century and into the 21st century. However, they are overlooked in academic studies, being frequently labeled as illegal or undocumented immigrants despite entering the U.S. as asylum seekers. This

³⁴ Brandt Allen Himler, "Chinese Student Protection Act of 1992," 111.

³⁵ Qian Ning, "To Return or to Stay," in *Chinese Students Encounter America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 194.

³⁶ Qian Ning, "To Return or to Stay," 194.

³⁷ Qian Ning, "To Return or to Stay," 197.

portrayal of Chinese refugees, particularly those who arrived from the late 20th century to the present, starkly contrasts with earlier waves from the 1940s and 1990s. These differences are notably influenced by varying levels of U.S. government support and differing intentions behind their migration.

The significant wage differences between the U.S. and China have long made the U.S. an attractive destination for migration. From 1960 to 2000, the influx of Chinese immigrants made obtaining residency through legal pathways increasingly difficult. The Immigration and Naturalization Act imposes annual caps on employer-sponsored and family-based visas for all countries, leading to substantial visa application backlogs for populous nations like China.³⁸ This situation has made it particularly challenging for highly skilled migrants or those with family already legally residing in the U.S. to enter through legal channels, especially for working-class migrants without such connections.³⁹ Consequently, due to the difficulty of acquiring U.S. residency legally, many working-class Chinese have resorted to illegal pathways.⁴⁰

America's political stance against China has strategically influenced the increase in Chinese asylum seekers in the U.S. As China continued to expand its economy through market-oriented reforms, it emerged as a new threat to U.S. supremacy on the global stage. The U.S. sought to undermine China's international credibility by portraying it as an oppressive authoritarian regime that lacked the moral legitimacy to lead globally while casting itself as the moral leader.⁴¹ U.S.'s political need strategically increases its acceptance of Chinese asylum seekers, particularly those who could provide narratives of persecution by the Chinese government. In fact, asylum applications by Chinese nationals have the highest approval rates in all types of asylum cases compared to any other nationality. Each new

³⁸ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, "The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US," *Social Forces* 100, no. 3 (2022): 1204.

³⁹ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, "The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US," 1203.

⁴⁰ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, "The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US," 1197.

⁴¹ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, "The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US," 1205.

Chinese applicant for asylum in the U.S., regardless of whether asylum is awarded or denied, allows the state to perpetuate “a professional and public image of the United States as safe, civilized, and exceptional, and of China as inherently suspect.”⁴² This acceptance of Chinese asylum seekers not only serves to discredit the Chinese government but also provides a viable and efficient pathway for working-class Chinese immigrants to enter the U.S. Indeed, smugglers have advised many illegal immigrants to present narratives that align with U.S. expectations during their asylum applications.⁴³ Among these, numerous individuals have fabricated stories of persecution to expedite their asylum protection.⁴⁴

However, it is possible that a portion of these illegal immigrants did face persecution, making them genuine refugees who did not falsify their asylum applications. The challenge lies in the homogeneous narratives presented by Chinese asylum seekers, which obscure their true identities and intentions. This uniformity makes it difficult to distinguish between those who are illegal immigrants and those who are bona fide refugees, complicating the U.S.’s ability to assess and address each case effectively and further perpetuating the underrepresentation of Chinese refugees.

Besides obscured identities, the superior socioeconomic status of Chinese illegal immigrants and refugees compared to those from Latin America further distances the term “refugee” from Chinese communities in the U.S., contributing to their portrayal as the model minority. Research indicates that, in the pre-Trump era, smuggling fees ranged from \$80,000 for migrants from China to \$5,000 for those from Central America.⁴⁵ This astronomical cost implies that the average illegal Chinese immigrant and refugee is more socially advantaged, wealthier, and better connected than typical illegal migrants from Latin America. These advantages enable them to more easily secure jobs and housing upon arrival in the U.S.,

⁴² Michele Statz, “Chinese Difference and Deservingness: The Paper Lives of Young Migrants,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 13 (2016):1644.

⁴³ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, “The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US,” 1210.

⁴⁴ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, “The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US,” 1209.

⁴⁵ Amy Hsin and Sofya Aptekar, “The Violence of Asylum: The Case of Undocumented Chinese Migration to the US,” 1204.

contrasting with the typical refugee image often associated with significant poverty and economic hardship. Consequently, the label of model minority has persisted among illegal Chinese immigrants, and since Chinese refugees are grouped with these immigrants, they are also seen as part of this model minority. As a result, their mixed identity and socioeconomic advantages make it difficult for observers to distinguish whether they are illegal immigrants applying for asylum to immigrate to the U.S. or genuine refugees who have experienced persecution in China.

Conclusion

From the first Chinese refugees caused by the upheaval of the Chinese Civil War to the Chinese nationals' daring journeys across the Darien Gap, the story of Chinese refugees embodies the intricate complexities and nuances that define contemporary refugee movements. The initial group of refugees comprised elite individuals who acquired refugee status without leaving their nation; this was followed by a wave of students who sought refuge out of fear of persecution upon returning home. The most recent wave, occurring over the past few decades, involves predominantly working-class Chinese who seek to immigrate to the U.S.

While each group was classified as refugees, the nature of their refugee identity has evolved—from a status involuntarily assumed to a tool strategically employed, and from an unavoidable circumstance to a deliberately chosen path. This shift brings to light the blurred lines between refugees and immigrants, the varied intentions behind seeking refuge, and the spectrum of narratives that range from concocted tales of persecution to genuine accounts of suffering. These developments challenge the traditional conceptions of what constitutes a refugee, compelling us to question the very essence of refugee status: Can individuals who alter their circumstances to gain asylum still rightfully claim refugee status? Does the act of misrepresentation itself disqualify them from being considered refugees? And does the absence of often horrifying fleeing experiences, which are typically associated with refugee stories, diminish these individuals' rights and status as refugees?

Building on these complexities, the uniqueness of Chinese refugees is accentuated by their gradual, often unrecognized shift from visitors to refugees, alongside the U.S. government's support driven more by geopolitical interests than humanitarian concerns. These factors, coupled with narratives that often mirror those of illegal immigrants seeking economic opportunities rather than safety, and higher socioeconomic status, starkly differentiate Chinese refugees from traditional refugee stories. Such distinctions not only obscure their genuine struggles but also push the boundaries of the established definitions of a refugee.

The presence of Chinese refugees highlights the need to broaden and refine the refugee discourse to include a wider range of circumstances and definitions. This expanded perspective is essential for a more precise and empathetic global response to displacement, emphasizing the importance of engaging deeply with the varied and complex narratives of those seeking refuge.

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